WHAT EX-EXGAYS CAN TEACH US ABOUT GAY, LESBIAN, AND QUEER RHETORICS

By

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ABSTRACT

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What Ex-ExGays Can Teach Us About Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Rhetorics is an interview-based research project, where I assemble a gay, lesbian, and queer (GLQ) rhetoric grounded in what I call "GLQ rhetorical responsibilities"—activist rhetorical practices related to interrupting historic homophobic forces. I locate my research at the virtual site, *Ex-Ex-Gays*—a Facebook community made up of gay men and lesbians, myself included, who participated in but ultimately oppose the ex-gay movement. This movement centers on a western phenomenon linked to conservative organizations that claim to assist gay men and lesbians with sexual conversion through ministry and therapy. From my data, I argue that research participants (whom I call participatory theorists) tell stories meant to inform, to persuade, and to enact change within particular audience networks, share difficult perspectives based on histories of violence, employ queer narrative practices intended to disrupt and to revise grand narratives about ex-exgay activism, and use stories as a way to mediate and reclaim shame.

DEDICATION

For Adam

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I wouldn't be here right now without the encouragement, support, and love of many amazing people. I struggle with the "how" here—how do I thank people not just for seeing me through the development, writing, and revision of this project, but for guiding me to be a better researcher and teacher, for helping me see the world differently, and for being amazing human beings. For that last part—the "human beings" part—I'm most thankful.

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My outside reader, Will Banks—"oh, Wonka"—came to my 8:00 a.m. *Fem/Rhet* session on a rainy Friday in October 2007. The rest of the presenters couldn't make it that morning, so there I was … a nervous MA student with an entire hour-and-a-half session to myself. Hands-down, the most thoughtful audience member, Will asked me helpful questions that led to the further development of my scholarly and teacherly confidence. Will and I soon became friends, and over the years, he's become dear to me. His commitment to

and enthusiasm for this project are beyond anything I could have imagined. I'm blessed with his mentorship and friendship.

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by playful "trash-talking" with Novak and Sarah). I'm grateful for the down-time we allowed ourselves to have together during the immense challenges of graduate school.

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All it takes is her warmth and a few minutes on the phone of laughing, and even though we've not lived in the same city in nearly four years, I know she's right there with me. On a daily basis, she teaches me about loyalty, love, and friendship. It's rare to meet others in grad school who actually stick with you through the rest of your life. She and Bre are those friends for me—life friends. And then there were three (doctors)! I love you, Brea! I love you, Care!

Matt Novak—my "life husband," "my girlfriend"—has seen me through every phase of this process. He's seen me in my most vulnerable states—laughing 'til I cry, crying 'til I can't help but laugh. We have a bond that I will always cherish. From him, I've begun to understand love, trust, and loyalty. And frankly, who else would I honk the "haaaayyy horn" with? Who else would I go on Wednesday work dates with? Not sure what I'd have done here in Lansing without *Flashdance*, "we're the fat girls," stress-eating, Sushi Ya dates, ERC dates, "follow that queen!," root beers and beer at Woody's, Dorothy Allison, "in the event that you …," *Little Women*, and our all-time favorite moment: "Oh, *really? Really?"* I love you, Matt Novak.

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ridiculously silly). Excuse me, person? I'll end your section, Matty, with the phrase that started us off: "And in that moment, I swear we were infinite." Isn't that what we *had said*?

My parents Rusty Webster and Belynda Smith—"D. Cats and Momma"—are my biggest fans. They've never been anywhere but by my side from day-one. They've both always told me I could be anything I wanted to be, as long as I put good energy and love into the world. I've learned so much academic and professional stuff in ten years of post-secondary education, but the lessons I remember most come from them: *Be mindful of how others feel. Help and love others. Do what you say you're gonna do. Love with all your heart. Be patient. Be passionate. Be honest. Be nice. Be yourself. And while you're doing all that, be strong.* These are lessons that both of them live by on a daily basis. Their teachings live through me, for I seek to "pay forward" what they've taught me. I love you both more than I can possibly put into words, Mom & Dad.

Adam Thompson—"Mizztaaaah!" "New York"—his sons and his sister, Bree, have been a, if not *the*, light in my life since the fall of 2010, when we all first met. Adam and I have seen each other through love, loss, strength, weakness, tears, and laughs. I love him with all my heart and am blessed he came into my life. His support of me, these stories, my stories, and this entire project has been tireless and unflagging. He's a, if not *the*, constant in my life, and I only hope I can give back to him—and to the world—all that he's given me. On a late night in October 2010, he took a chance and flew into Lansing from Sarasota to meet me. We stayed up late that night talking about our lives, our loves, our pasts, and our futures. I knew in those moments that he'd be in my life forever. During this process, our walks on the Sarasota beaches, our trips to Orlando, Tampa, and St. Pete, and our night

strolls on St. Armand's Circle (people-watching, window-shopping, munching on pear Jelly Bellies, and eating Kilwin's) made my world a better place. I look forward to all that our lives hold for us. I love you, Adam.

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Chapter 1:
Introducing Ex-Ex-Gays
and Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Rhetorics

It's 8:45 a.m. October 31, 2010. The main conference is about to start. My hands are shaking a little. When I get this perfect storm of fear and anger, my jaw normally shakes. On this particular morning, I'm thankful that my jaw isn't shaking because it makes my teeth chatter loudly, and it's really noticeable. I want to be anonymous here. I didn't bring a laptop. I'd look too much like an academic. But the funny thing is, even if I felt really academicky, which I don't right now, I'd not know what I was supposed to find here. And no idea what I'd say about it. I'm not a researcher here, even though that's what I thought I'd be when I told my committee I was coming to this thing. In the row behind me, two effeminate men are laughing, carrying on, talking about the attractiveness of one of the women staying on-site with them. Simultaneously, I hear one pinch the other and giggle. They're positioning this play as jovial "bro" interaction. It's not. I can hear differently and sense even more. I can smell the sex in the room. Two-hundred people in one conference hall; three-fourths are men trying not to look at each other. You can cut the sexual tension in the room with a knife.

I paid my registration fee, spoke with a representative, and received my information and documents electronically. The process wasn't that different from registering for *CCCC*. The email receipt for them taking my money for registration looks no different than any other "conference" I'd gone to in my career. Thank you for your payment, they say.

As I'm sitting here, I feel that my fitted pants are too loose. I didn't eat enough. No amount of greens, vitamins, and protein shakes could have given me the Wheaties breakfast

boost I'd need to manage myself this morning. The conference fee included a breakfast. I got up and went to the banquet hall really early. I filled my plate with stuff I knew I wasn't going to eat. Eggs, French toast, donuts. While I was in line this morning, at least three men approached me to chat about "my journey." They were looking me up and down, but Jesus was watching so they got their eyes in check when they recognized that I recognized their looks. When approached to talk, I just said I needed time to take everything in—that I wasn't really up for talking about "my journey." I wasn't lying.

I'm seated in the middle of the room on the end of the row in this medium-sized conference-style room. Near the exit. A horrendous cacophony of microphone screeches begins the morning's "hellos," as a leader introduces himself and welcomes us, thanking us for joining them here this weekend. With that brief introduction, we start with a praise band, lots of singing, lots of sitting and standing. I'm one of the few people here who doesn't have a Bible with me, but someone kindly gives me their extra earlier. I thank them. I mean it. I'm fighting the fact that I'm being extremely polite and I mean it. I'm not faking it. I fundamentally hate what's going on here. I wonder how different these people really are than me, had my experiences been slightly different. We're humans in all this together: I can't forget this, but at other moments, I can't remember this. After we sing with lyrics about "[coming] out of your prisons" and "I'm my dad's favorite," we hear testimonies. To me, the speakers are faceless. I couldn't remember what these people looked like if I had to. I can barely listen, but also can't hear enough.

The leader introduces us to the morning's testimonial. Testifying, the guy at the front of the room begins telling a story that's the same old trope I've heard a thousand times

before; he had a poor relationship with his dad and didn't excel at sports. This isn't my first rodeo. It's an engagingly enraging story. And I'm taking notes. Occasionally, I'm writing "fuck you" in the margin, just to let out a little negative energy. My handwriting sucks, and I'm not sure if I'll even be able to read my notes when I get home. God, I want to be home right now. The guy is going on and on. People are clapping, crying—praising him. He's "come in out of the dark," the leaders say, as they said when they introduce him, pointing to him as an example of a "fighter." He still struggles with his sexuality, but now he's celibate, he says. He still fights same-sex "urges," but openly talks to his girlfriend about his struggles. She understands, he says, because she's also a "fighter." He's not "healed of the shell of a person he used to be," but he'd rather be a "struggler" than "a gay." He asks, "Will I always fight these attractions for men?" (yes.) and "Will I ever feel strong enough to get married?" (you're on your own with that one, girl.). "Freedom," he says, "is not freedom from homosexuality, but freedom to accept the struggle with it." Lord, help me. The testimonies come to an end. The "keynote speaker" begins talking. It's not Andrea Lunsford, as far as I can tell. He says so much homophobic, misogynistic stuff in thirty minutes time that my head spins. If I had to put his "sermon" into one sentence, it'd be a train wreck of phrases about "God's plan for sexuality," "culture has God's plan wrong," "we're more than just our sexualities," "from Genesis, we can understand the true nature of the masculine and feminine," "Christian sex isn't about pleasure," "the new godless progressive supports paganism," "we should be filled up by God, not by demons." I'm the pagan they're talking about. I can't remember feeling this way in years.

More testimonies are given. By men. Other speakers come up and tell similar stories

to that of the keynote. Fighting the good fight (against homosexuality). No women tell stories, nor do they speak, other than to give praise to the men telling stories. When the stories are done, they sing. They sing for what seems like an hour. I've always hated singing in church. They're singing to make people straight, for people to be less gay, for people to fight "urges." I start thinking about my mom and me in church when I was kid. I smile. She and I used to try to make each other laugh during services. This memory gets me through singing. The praise band leads us in worship music, as does the screen that highlights the song lyrics as we work our ways through pop-music-style hymns. I stand, but again I don't sing. The stories are so deeply in me right now that I'm only moving my lips and mouthing words. By this point, I've not run because I feel like I'm invested now. I'm on the inside now, and I need to keep looking.

The singing dies down. The hymns stop. We're dismissed to our "break-out" sessions. I don't know what this means. This morning, I made my way to breakfast, yes, but I did so after being lost on the conference site. I'm staying at a hotel away from the conference site. The conference chair suggested I go ahead and stay on-site, so that I could have an "accountability partner" in my room with me; that's a fancy way of saying a male roommate (another "struggler"). But I don't because, well, I just can't. I'm staying at a run-down motel about a half-a-mile away with Matt Cox. The room looks like the backdrop from the film *Vacancy*, but it's less scary than the conference site. And when I say "site," I mean it. It's located on a few acres that go deep into the woods. Once you turn off the highway, you drive about a mile into the woods toward a lake. Seen the movie, *The Village*? The cottages in that small community are the only thing I can compare this place to. Keep in

mind that when I arrived here, it was 8:00 a.m. The sun was coming up. But I couldn't see the sky through the clearings in the trees. It was dark as night. The closer I got to the lake, the more small cottages I saw. Near the cottages was the larger conference center. I parked, walked around for a few minutes, but couldn't find out exactly where I was supposed to be. Because I'd not stayed on-site, they weren't taking care of me in the same way. I finally found where I was supposed to be and ate breakfast. Because I'm not on-site, I don't yet have access to the registration packet with information about my "break-out session" designation.

After I ask a leader at the morning's praise and worship, I find out that I'm not yet linked to a break-out session, but I can join the group for "young male strugglers, aged 18-30." Seas of people are parting to their respective sites. I find out from a few men walking near me that the groups meet in the cottages that I saw driving through the woods. These men, no doubt, befriended me because I look lost. They're nice, but make me incredibly uncomfortable. I have only an idea of what goes on in the cottages. My first instinct is to run. What I've seen already in the form of praise and worship is enough, I think to myself. But I feel committed because I've already started talking to someone. I've already been identified as someone in the cottage. I'm astounded that the men are this friendly with each other. I then remember that they've been staying together in these cottages since 5:00 p.m. the previous day. They've been each other's accountability partners. I'd always heard this word from back when I was involved in this movement, but I'm horrified about what it actually looks like in the flesh. It looks like a tango around the act of dry-humping, or like soft-core porn. I'm immediately an outsider, I realize, by sheer fact that I've not stayed on-

site (as if the message wasn't clear enough this morning, when I couldn't find my way around or identify anyone to help me get to the right place). By this point, we are nearing the cottage, which is a few-minutes' walk away from the main conference center. I say hardly anything, as the men in my age group are laughing, joking, drawing upon the previous night's experiences, and flirting (giving each other "noogies").

Nearing the steps, I find the cottage to be, well, beautiful. I'm terrible at describing physical objects, but I guess if I had to put words around it, I'd say it looks like a cottage from a Thomas Kincaid painting set near the water. Once in the cottage, I see the kitchen and its remnants from a night of "accountability" (I'm assuming), a bunch of half-eaten Oreos on a plate along with a kitchen-full of similarly processed junk food and soft drinks. After a few minutes, we gather in the main living area, arranging ourselves in a circle. I'm nearest to the hallway leading to the front door. I might need to run.

"Welcome, guys. I want us to start today's break-out session with stories," says the leader, I can't give his name, as he calls us to order. I'm not talking but most everyone is. He says that the morning's testimonies, praise, and worship should inspire us to tell our own stories, so that we can be accountable to each other. If we can confess all of our stories, our struggles, we can be on the path back to salvation. I'm angry and horrified. I know that I really am going to have to run at some point. A "brave" young man who couldn't be older than 25 tells his story. It's about finally understanding that what his dad has said all his life about him being a "fag" and a "sissy" is right. Since he's gotten involved in this organization, he's cut his close ties to the women in his family and tried to get closer to his dad and uncles. He's done this by going on hunting trips, where, he says, they still mock him and call him

names. He hates hunting, he says, but the experience brings him closer to his "destiny as a productive man." I'm sure I'm going to be sick. I want to simultaneously scream at and hug these men.

The next speaker, the leader, tells his story. He's recently married and has a daughter. Those two "unions" with his wife and daughter make him feel like a man. He doesn't miss his homosexuality, he says. At this point, I watch the other men in the room, many of whom are watching each other then averting their eyes when "caught." When not watching each other, I see that they look to this leader as an example. He's made it out. I realize I'm back and forth between two things: what am I going to say when it's my turn to share, and how has a houseful of men this attractive not put a hole in the earth from fucking the night before?

The third speaker, the jock I call him in my head, begins by telling us that we should take up a game of tag football at the lunch break. He's holding a Nerf football as he talks. He's didactic in the way he talks to the group. He says he's already got the sports part down. He just has to be careful where his eyes and thoughts go. I fight the urge to size him up. I'm thinking I'm gay and I could beat you in a game of pick-up one-on-one (not a euphemism). I like him least of everyone here. I don't care if anyone hugs him. He's a lifetime of people telling me that gay men aren't athletic, aren't weight-lifters, aren't coordinated, aren't good with their bodies.

I tune out. All the stories sound similar.

"We have time for one more story before lunch and football. Wait, no we don't. Travis, will you tell us your story *after break*?" asks the leader.

"Sure." The first word I've uttered in nearly two hours. I dodge a bullet.

I leave the house. The other men walk back toward the conference hotel. I walk to my car. I don't eat lunch. I don't play football. I text Matt and meet him at a Subway about ten minutes from the conference site. He asks me how it went. I can't get my head around the words I need to say. We check out of our motel within the hour, and we head to another city for Halloween on a whim. I need to do something to take my mind off all this. I'm thankful that I experienced this when I did, and not earlier in life. I know I'd have been broken had I seen this at 19. I thank God. I leave realizing that I'm not sure what this experience will do for my dissertation, but nonetheless it confirms for me that I was supposed to see all this. I am supposed to be doing this research.

The Context, Site, and Participants of the Project

I told the above story to offer you a narrative background of the ex-gay movement—a site that evokes the counter-activisms of this project. The American Ex-Gay Movement is a global but primarily western phenomenon grounded in conservative Christian organizations that claim to assist gay and lesbian[1] people with sexual conversions from gay to straight. You've probably seen snippets of this phenomenon over the past two decades, with phrases such as "pray the gay away" used in the media for sheer spectacle. This

[1] Identity definitions: I define "gay" as an adjectival identifier of men or women who have intimate, relational, and/or sexual relationships with members of the same sex; gay, though, in this project and in culture at large, often means gay *men*. I define "lesbian" also as an adjectival identifier but for women who primarily seek intimate, relational, and/or sexual relationships with other women. Certainly, postmodern critical theories warn against "defining" any one identity; for the purposes of this project, however, I have to define terms, so that my audiences will be better equipped to understand my arguments.

movement isn't new. Dating back to the 1970s (at least)[2], conservative religious groups, conservative ministries, and outreach programs have emerged claiming to assist individuals with changing their sexuality, namely their homosexuality, through ritual prayer, behavior modification, and revised gender performance. "Ex-gay" is a complicated term, referring to a gay person who seeks sexual conversion—one who has tried or is trying to "transition" from a gay to straight identity. This term has many nuances, though, as ex-gays also identify as those who want to actually be straight, while others, however, simply identify this way because they wish to not practice same-sex sexual acts. Others simply may struggle with mediating Christian and gay identities.

Also a complicated term, "ex-ex-gays," the participants and primary theorists of this project, have formerly partaken in sexual conversion practices, ministries, or therapies, but ultimately reject the ex-gay movement's ideologies in order to reclaim gay, lesbian, or queer identities. For a moment, consider the word "ex-ex-gay." Interesting configuration of prefixes, infixes, and suffixes, huh? Upon hearing this word, people often ask me if I'm referring to "just gay people" or "people who used to be gay." Sometimes, I am even asked, "oh, X-X-gay – are you talking about gay porn?" Even as someone who identifies with the resistant values that this word implies, I recognize both its confusing nature but also its rhetorical affordances. From this project, I've learned that Michael Bussee, a participant in

[2] The rise of modernism informs a connection to "the self" unforeseen in previous historical moments making possible a self-referential connection to the body and its inherent malleability. I don't argue sexual reparation didn't happen before the 1970s; I'm merely arguing that this particular movement arises during this historical context.

this participant, an original co-founder of Exodus International[3], and a current opponent of ex-gay ministries, coined this term in the early 1990s in response to the ex-gay movement. These participants and this group offers queer and non-queer people alike a lens for understanding how other queer folks make meaning and disseminate knowledges. Thus, we're more than just a group of queers with a funny name. Yes, I use "we" here; I'm part of this group, too, as my background ties me to both being an ex-gay and an ex-ex-gay[4].

In the Gay 1990s[5], western media introduced previously-coined words like "ex-gay" and "ex-exgay" into American households, as evidenced by August 1998's *Newsweek*. Headlining an article on gay conversion therapies, the magazine cover featured the words "ex-gay" on the cover, bold. For the cover photo, John and Anne Paulk, prominent ex-gay activists, sat together, his arm around her waist, both conservatively attired: he, in a collared shirt and sports jacket; she, in flowered dress with gold cross pendant around her neck. Titled "Gay for Life? Going Straight: The Uproar Over Sexual Conversion," the story chronicled the Paulks' former "separation from God," and subsequent fall from "God's plan for sexuality" (*Newsweek),* marking a career for John as, after this feature, he became the poster-child for the ex-gay movement: Exodus International executives hired Paulk as a motivational speaker at ex-gay conventions. In early 2000, however, a mere two years after

[3] Exodus International is a conservative Christian organization known as one of the earliest "ex-gay ministries"; its practices surround the implementation of assistance for individuals who seek sexual reparation and conversion. Michael Bussee and Gary Cooper, two activists who later spoke out against the movement's ideologies and politics, founded the organization. Bussee is a participant in this project.

[4] Later, I tell my story.

[5] A historical period noted for emergent gay visibility in western culture.

his didactic interview with *Newsweek*[6], Paulk was discovered at Washington, D.C.'s oldest gay pub. His discovery launched a series of oft-mocked events that inform how the ex-gay movement is talked about in western media—events that also ground the values of the ex-ex-gay countermovement, upon which this project rests. In the 2000s and 2010s, a number of American politicians inspired further ex-gay conversations through the cases of Ted Haggard, Larry Craig, and Mark Foley, conservative political figures many of whom publicly denounce non-straight sexualities but who've later been recognized as men who've engaged in same-sex practices and relationships. Upon public "outing" of these practices and relationships, each of these men has sought conversion therapies. Most recently, the word "ex-gay" surfaces in the stories surrounding Marcus Bachman, Michele Bachman's husband, a psychologist who many have spoken out against for his advocacy of such conversion practices. As a practice, western media often mocks and derides these practices, despite evangelical advocacy, as can be seen from films like 1999's *But I'm a Cheerleader*, 2004's *Saved!*, and 2007's *Save Me*, all of which satirize and dramatize ex-gay representations, respectively, each offering skepticism of sexual conversion practices.

Queer theory tells us that gay and straight identity categories aren't stable, as we queer theorists and rhetoricians are aptly aware, which leads to a number of assumptions in need of reworking, rethinking, and revising. This project, though, isn't about undermining the argumentative strategies of any ex-gay organization, for that's a conversation that's ongoing; nor does my dissertation point a finger at this "bad" or "problematic" western phenomenon.

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[6] During his interview, Paulk called *all* homosexuals to "convert" to heterosexuality and discussed any "unnatural" sexual identities as apart from a natural, Godly scheme of sexuality (*Newsweek*).

As a former ex-gay myself, I know that sexual conversion practices are harmful, a description among a list of many pejoratives. The *Newsweek* article and the other texts I mention deal with ex-gay representation, though this project is not about ex-gay rhetorics but about tracing how men from a counter-community enact gay, lesbian, and queer[7] rhetorics and what these rhetorics mean for gay people's dissemination of knowledge- and identity-making practices.

My research is grounded in the online Facebook site, *Ex-Ex-Gay*—a group of men and women who have participated in but ultimately reject ex-gay practices. The group is a public Facebook group; however, you have to join the group and be accepted by its administrators in order to access the wall and participate in discussions. At 248 members as of October 1, 2011, the group offers a space where gay people who have participated in ex-gay ministries and therapies can share common stories, talk to each other, post relevant media and articles to the common wall, and build community. Group members come from various backgrounds: most are survivors of ex-gay practices; some are gay allies; others are gay people who just flat-out oppose the institutional rhetorics that ex-gay practices support.

While there exist formal, non-profit groups that address this topic, such as *Beyond Ex-Gay*, this group is not affiliated with any one organization. As I mentioned before, I'm a member. I joined originally because I'd come across the group early in my master's coursework. I knew of Michael Bussee because he's a public figure and opponent of ex-gay

[7] Here, I use "queer" to describe non-normative sexualities; I'm not describing queer theories or rhetorics (yet). Later, though, I wager that this research is a queer culturally-situated project that does, indeed, employ the lens of disruption—a major tenet of queer theories and rhetorics (as disciplines).

practices. When I was part of ex-gay ministries and therapies, I knew him as someone who'd "lost his way." Michael and Alex, another participant I will introduce soon, are both administrators of the site and regularly post articles, media, and commentary about religiously affiliated or ex-gay-connected topics. For instance, Michael recently reminded the group that October is LGBT history month; another member mentioned a gay-affirmative line from a recent *Law & Order: SVU* episode; another, a "Hate Begets Hate" article from a gay-affirmative and -friendly blog.

This project includes stories from *Ex-ex-gay* group members, Michael, Alex, Jack, and Brent[8]. As I've mentioned before, Michael is Michael Bussee, a co-founder of Exodus International, a group known for its involvement and advocacy in sexual conversion ministries. Michael, a retired counselor, has requested that I include his full name in this dissertation. Growing up in Riverside, California, Michael spent years as an advocate of Exodus, where he was a leader, speaker, and proponent of conversion practices. Since the early 1980s, he has rejected sexual conversion ministries and therapies of Exodus and their affiliates, and since 1991, he has openly spoken against their practices and leaders in public forums. As recent as May 2011, he was interviewed by Lisa Ling for a special on the Oprah Winfrey Network dealing with sexual conversion practices.

In the 1970s, Michael married and had children and after becoming involved with Exodus, went on the road as a speaker for the organization. The same decade, Michael met Gary Cooper, another Exodus leader and speaker. According to Michael, they fell in love

[8] Alex, Jack, and Brent are pseudonyms for these participants. Michael requested to go by his actual and full name.

over time, at first trying to keep the relationship under wraps, then later coming out about it publicly. A 1979 Exodus conference saw Michael and Gary come out about their relationship and about their true feelings about sexual conversion practices, for they used conference time to denounce the practices of the organizations, and soon after were banished. In the 1980s and 1990s, Michael and Gary stayed away from the media. Upon Gary's passing in the early 1990s, Michael began speaking out against Exodus and became a strong opponent of such organizations and affiliates.

As an administrator of the online community, Michael posts to the group often with articles, threads, and interesting reads he finds online. One night, he asked a number of us to participate in a series of threads on the *Dr. Drew* Facebook page, where a number of Facebook users spoke in advocacy of sexual conversion practices. With poise and peace, Michael offered a completely different perspective to these users and encouraged us to do the same, through a series of forum debates on the page's wall. We offered stories as our "side" of the debate, of course.

Alex, a person with whom I've grown very close since the interviews and since joining the online group, is also a former leader from Exodus. Raised on the East Coast, he dealt with a number of instances in his life—some of which come up in his stories—that led him to the organization. He left for an East Coast college at age 18, leaving behind two verbally abusive parents from whom he learned strict Christian dogma, he says. Joining a series of fundamentalist collegiate Christian groups, Alex, never feeling attraction to women and staying close to his fundamentalist background, began to feel as though he was in need of changing his sexuality. His main involvement in the group is centered on keeping peace

and love in the world, he says. He's close to Michael, a major reason for his involvement in the group, but unlike Michael, he doesn't connect with a Christian faith any longer.

Jack is in law enforcement in small town that neighbors a metropolitan city. Active in the Facebook group less than the previous two participants, he and I have also become friends over the years. Raised in a Church of Christ background with strict fundamentalist parents, Jack identifies as a gay male. He is recently single after a three-year relationship. Because of the homophobic nature of his profession, Jack is not out at work, but is out to most of his close friends. He is part of the Facebook group under a pseudonym, for he has experiences with sexual conversion and wants to keep up with the conversations that go in the group without being public about his group membership.

A less active member of the Facebook community, Brent, a graduate student, grew up in the rural Midwest. He identifies as gay and has a fundamentalist Christian background marked by experiences with sexual conversion, which he describes in detail in his stories. An avid reader, he's part of the group to keep up with Michael's posts. His first experiences with attempted sexual conversion came, like me, during his teen years, where his well-intended parents found a counselor for him upon his coming out. In college, he became active in a Christian student organization, but came out twice: once to his parents (but he and they assumed this was merely a phase) during the teen stage I mentioned above and later in his post-college years.

All part of this group for varying reasons—some of which weren't even shared in interviews—each of these men exhibits an activism and each seeks to tell stories as rhetorical offerings to audiences with whom they both identify and counter-identify at particular

rhetorical moments. I have to say, though, that none of these men identify in daily life as "ex-exgay." In introducing these men here, I hope to offer audiences background before sharing and theorizing their stories, but also I hope to communicate that these are men I know and with whom I share an online community and experience. My participants are what I will participatory theorists in this project, for their stories—their participations in sharing their lives—are the primary means by which meaning is made in this project, for all of these men offer us—gay, straight, queer—teachings about bodies across time and space. Here, I first outline the vision and trajectory of the project, then will trace a series of snapshots that speak to the major conversations outlined in this project, where I also offer a series of invitations that I hope you'll take with you as you participate and interact with this project and its stories.

An "Introduction" to the Project

As a teenager, I struggled with my sexuality, while never quite understanding how to be, how to fit in with other men, and why I didn't have words with which to describe myself—or why the words I did know scared me. As a college student, I had ex-gay, ex-ex-gay, straight, and queer experiences, but never knew quite how to name myself, for what purposes, or for whom. As a master's student, I poked around websites to study how ex-gay folks avoid being gay, as represented through visual rhetorics. To no avail, each instance left me confused and annoyed. My first PhD program year, I tried to understand what I called "gay men's rhetoric." Three years, a queer rhetorics course, an exam sequence, and a dissertation project later, I find that even tracing "a"—and not "the"—rhetoric of any one group is a formidable task. That said, I believe that groups do, indeed, exhibit rhetorical

practices and acts that offer a frame for how cultures make meanings and identities over time and within space.

Through this research site and through stories[9] from Michael, Alex, Jack, and Brent, I assemble a rhetorical theory reflective of responsibilities, for *now* is a *kairotic*[10]moment for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) people. This project traces how a gay, lesbian, and queer[11][12] (GLQ) rhetoric reflect "GLQ rhetorical responsibilities"—a term I adopt to theorize about how GLQ rhetorics play out through stories that make meaning for a group of gay men and their perceived audiences. Through stories, I examine rhetorical moments where these participatory theorists recognize audience networks, tell sexual experiences of pain and pleasure for rhetorical purposes, and queer grand narratives. While I sometimes rely on Greeks, Romans, and "white-guy"[13] rhetoricians, this work pushes against Greco-Roman celebrations, for I draw upon a queer rhetoric as a heuristic for theorizing about queer people's stories. Further, I don't apply a rhetoric lens to this piece (i.e. "oh, here's an example of *logos*), rather I listen for and seek to understand where

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[9] I define "story" and "stories" broadly. For me, stories are shared moments, perspectives, embodiments, and histories that point to how a person makes meaning about themselves and his communities.

[10] Later in this chapter, I will expand on the idea of a *kairotic* moment for GLBTQ folks.

[11] Identity definition: I define "queer" also as adjectival identifier of a men, women, and non-gender-identified people who claim sexualities and sexual identities apart from straight culture.

[12] I promise I'm not trying to confuse you: I include *two* acronyms in this project: one, "GLBTQ," is intended to offer inclusive language and speak to and about a broader queer community; the other (GLQ) is my acronym that describes a rhetoric examined in this project.

[13] Certainly, figures like Aristotle weren't "white" according to today's narrow racial categorizations, but these early rhetoricians are currently read through a lens of privilege and whiteness. That is, Aristotlean rhetorical models, while certainly *a* rhetorical tradition of a Greco-Roman culture, are adopted as *the* one-and-only rhetorical canon and are therefore "raced" and "classed" accordingly.

rhetorics emerge from participants' stories. I investigate stories because I believe that culturally GLQ people tell them to make visible our bodies, to deal with anger, to disrupt the heteronormative spaces around us, and to "disorient" ourselves in order to queer[14] the space around us (Ahmed 3). Essentially, stories help us in disorienting ourselves from oppressive grand narratives that seek to write us.

What do I mean by a GLQ rhetoric of responsibility, though, broadly? For instance, a week before the 2011 *Conference on College Composition and Communication*, my colleagues and I – all GLBTQ-identified people – spent the evening planning our all-day workshop titled "Fuck Tradition!: Making, Mapping, and Contesting Queer Relations." When together, we revel at our collective banter and humor, often sexual, bodily, bawdy, campy, and raunchy to the point that one colleague said, "this kind of humor seems to be characteristic of queer folks." While some straight folks might find these rhetorical moments offensive, I believe these instances point to rhetorics of visibility, responsibility, and activism. That is, speaking about our bodies is an activism that points to a responsibility that need not be oppressed, invisible, and carnivalized any longer. For these moments of joking about, talking about, and performing our bodies aren't simply "inappropriate" or "tasteless" comments, but markers of visibility in a western culture where we must tell stories—fight for visibilities—in order to be seen, heard, and understood. We are driven to resist and to be responsible for representing ourselves outside western ideas of a visible, acceptable body (read: straight, white, non-queer). On the surface, we do it to "connect" with other folks like us. From a

[14] Here, I use "queer" not as a noun but as verb related to disrupting knowledge and practice.

deeper perspective, though, we're "getting at" something—getting at stories, practices, lived lives that point to a common rhetoric of responsibility and resistance.

My dissertation chair and I always joke that a major part of any gay first date is about the coming out story. When did you do it? How old were you? What were folks' reactions? This in and of itself is a set of articulations and performances that informs many gay men and lesbians' everyday and collective existence. My point here is that telling stories of myriad "outings," among other rhetorical acts, reflect a rhetoric positioned in how GLQ people make knowledge through telling stories. What makes these stories different is that often gay men, lesbians, and queer people tell stories to combat sexual and bodily oppression and invisibility. I'd argue these rhetorical strategies have been and continue to be a response to modernism[15], for these movements grounded in "scientific" recognitions of bodies create narratives that trickle into western culture, whereby identities are fixed, determinate, identifiable, and recognizable.

Postmodern[16] understandings of bodies, which arise out of a response to these determinates, however, force other voices to be heard, so I'd argue that a queer rhetoric is always postmodern because of its blurriness and incoherence in how these traditions make

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[15] By modernism, I refer Jean-Francois Lyotard's critiques of modernism in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. In this text, he analyzes how Enlightenment-era "values" of truth, reason, logic, and progress disseminate into totalizing narratives that claim to explain and to offer capital-T truths, but reject inherent blurriness in knowledges and meanings, which are *not* often understood not as plural (as I have written them here) but as singular (one knowledge; one meaning) For Lyotard, modernism is about "grand narratives" that afford power to some but that ultimately constraint many.

[16] Postmodernism is a term I draw also from Jean-Francois Lyotard in reference to his deconstruction of the idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject. If modernism is about order, logic, and capital-T, then postmodern is about blurriness-es, uncertainties, and pluralities.

meanings for identities and cultures. I realize my audiences might question my use of a postmodern lens when I'm using "stable" identity categories like "gay," "lesbian," and "queer." However, I use these "stable" categories so that I use the language my audience is familiar with. Western culture rests on these "stable categories," so I need to use these categories in order for this argument to be heard.

These postmodern moments reflect resistances to modernist narratives. For instance, I think back a few years to my mom overhearing a conversation between two women at her hair salon. One of the women—the mother of a former basketball teammate—mentioned that she'd recently heard of one of my old teammates coming out. With anguish and disdain, this woman resorted to the comment "well, he came out, but I hear there are good ways to deal with that kind of stuff. There're ministries that can help those kinds of men get back on the right track and find the right girl." This woman's comment points to a rhetorical tradition of oppression—a story rearticulated into reality. Here, modernist threads align bodies with the rise of science – *the* credible institution – and imply that knowledge can be taxonomized into knowable categories. Under this rhetorical ideology, bodies can be known, shifted, changed, manipulated, simply because there is an "end result" – a recognizable, stable, healthy body – that science rhetorics recognize and suggest are attainable. A GLQ rhetoric, then, resists these stories by interrupting and inserting itself within them.

A response to oppressive rhetorical traditions, GLQ rhetorics are about responsibilities to tell stories about sex, humor, naming, fucking, pain, pleasure, anger—all for mindful reasons—for many gay people are responsible rhetoricians who seek to inform, to persuade, and to enact change within like and unlike audiences. But in these cases, we're

not eliciting one vision of sexuality—for queer theories point to blurred stories that offer multiple interpretations. So, when I mention "disruption," I have more than one vision of what this can mean. Further, we're not just disrupting but interrupting and moving in, for an interruption is more than simply shaking things up: it's a halt and subsequent reassembly of dominant discourses. When bridged with this rhetorical heuristic, participants' stories point in many different directions. Below, I've outlined a few pedagocial snapshots that will help you continue to interact with the stories and knowledges of this project.

Pedagogical Snapshots

Pedagogical Snapshot 1: Stories teach us that all our bodies are complicated spaces, and we have a responsibility to talk about these complications …

Even in light of recent gay visibility, GLQ identities are not easily "understood." The people in this project have often inhabited many bodies at once (and the same could be said for nearly anyone, gay, straight, queer, or otherwise). But like ex-exgays, we're often *all* juggling multiple, conflicting, messy spaces that aren't knowable through essentialized categories or grand narratives. One might need not identify as GLTBQ to find truth in such a statement. The problem comes when a culture tries to "know" or "understand" us through a single lens. Such misunderstandings have implications far from simple misunderstandings—for these misunderstandings have material, bodily, institutional, political, and economical ramifications. Our stories must point to the complicated nature of our embodiments. This first snapshot is directed not just at the responsibilities of my GLQ audiences, but at all audiences, for I invite you all to tell your stories to address issues for which you feel responsible. I ask you to think about your audiences, as many of them as you

can conceptualize—the ones you love, hate, and all those in between. In this project, I'll talk to you about things connected to GLQ people and their bodies. But I invite you to take your story-telling practices and conceptions of your audience networks to spaces where you see injustices happening, whether local, global, or some hybrid of the two. Locate your passions and speak to those passions by telling and re-telling stories. In doing so, foster your relationships, because …

Pedagogical Snap Shot 2: … GLQ rhetorics are grounded in building relationships ...

Following a job market teaching demonstration last month, I had a silent break-through. The hiring committee asked that I teach a "fundamental writing lesson" to them, a few writing faculty folks from the division, and the department chair (they were my "student audience"). I'd put together a full discussion about Rhetoric, rhetorics, and writing for different audiences, and they'd completed a writing activity before wrapping up a large-group discussion. In my final re-cap, I'd included the phrase "So What?" on my Power Point header, which was intended to do two things: (1) to show the committee a meta-argument about why I chose to do the demonstration, namely why it was "fundamental" to my writing pedagogy, and (2) to map a vision for how a discussion of rhetorics, Rhetoric, and writing would impact our discussion as well as writing practices for the entire semester (an activity like this one would come early in the semester—week-one). On my "So-What?" slide, I offered my final thoughts, which laid out three take-aways: (1) "How we make arguments and communicate with writing matters," (2) "How we reflect upon the situation in which we write matters," and (3) "How we interact and build relationships with audiences matters." The activity I'd planned focused heavily on writing to and for audiences, including

brainstorming and analyzing about how to write for particular audiences (as well as an actual writing activity grounded in this discussion). In my notes and from their responses, I realized I'd said multiple times that in the context of writing, "rhetoric is about building relationships with audiences." The most obvious statement I can imagine struck me later that day (in the moment, I was in complete job market mode). It's taken me four years to wrap my head around a rhetorical mantra as simple as this one.

I know that I learned this and offer it to you today because of my current relationships with the ex-exgays. I can point to this pedagogical moment through the very layout of this project. Take a look at my early description of my participants in this chapter, for instance. The descriptions are flat. Michael, Alex, Brent, and Jack are represented through descriptive paragraphs that mirror the language and sentiment of case studies. As the story (the dissertation) unravels, you'll get to know each of the participants—hear their stories—and, perhaps, even theorize with us. This dissertation is a story. I will tell it in a particular way to afford you, audience, insight into the embodied rhetorical practices of the people in this project. The stories are varied—all are beautiful, but many are difficult to hear, to read, to share, and to tell, but …

Pedagogical Snapshot 3: … we're responsible for telling the hard stories even if and/or when they're hard on our bodies.

"Stories matter." "We're all about stories." "All we have are stories." We hear these kinds of claims often in culturally-situated rhetorics scholarship. I believe all of the above. All this said, I think until about two months ago, I'd not let myself admit that telling stories is one of the hardest things I've ever had to do professionally. Because what I research and

write about is incredibly close to me, I find myself cringing often. I find myself tired even more often. I find myself blushing, tearing up, getting sick, vomiting, and biting my nails—much like participants in this project do—as often as I write, think, and theorize. If there's ever going to be marriage equality, fewer homophobic hate crimes, more acknowledgement of trans visibility, less bullying, fewer gay teen suicides, and the fall of ex-gay institutions, we have to tell the stories that make us uncomfortable. Telling *all* the stories isn't easy, because we have a tendency to only tell the ones that keep our bodies safe. This is hard work, though, and even while I'm sitting here telling you to do this kind of work, I realize I don't often know how to do it. Most of my family, for instance, doesn't know many of these stories of mine. I sometimes don't tell stories when I, for instance, hear strangers making homophobic statements in my hometown. But over time, I know I have to. As I've learned through my participant relationships, we have to talk about sex, rape, violence, blood, doctor's visits, HIV, semen, bruises, tearing, scars, and injuries—if we're to be as responsible as we can be to our audiences. This project is about theorizing with stories—the good, the bad, and all the in-between—as you will soon see. Some of these stories, though, will make you feel uncomfortable, but such discomfort is necessary for activism, for listening, and for enacting change. In the final chapter, I will offer four more pedagogical snapshots that will act as a concluding thought. Offering them to you here could potentially inhibit the rhetorical design of this project; it's important that you hear stories first before I offer you these further snapshots. The further teachings first come from hearing the stories.

Chapter 2:
Tracing Methodologies & Heuristics

I can't talk about methodology without talking about relationships I have with participants, all of whom who have experiences similar to stories I will tell myself in this project. I mentioned earlier that the project's primary theorists are my participants. Much of how we've gone about making sense of our own bodies and their relationships to our activisms comes from getting to know each other and from sharing stories. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua call this embodied rhetorical experience a "theory of flesh." For Moraga and Anzaldua,

> A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions of our experience…[We refuse]… the easy explanation to the conditions we live in. […] Closer to home, daily, we feel the pull and tug of having to choose between which parts of our mothers' heritages we want to claim and wear and which parts have served to cloak us from the knowledge of ourselves. This is how our theory develops. We are interested in pursuing a society that uses flesh and blood experiences to concretize a vision that can begin to heal our "wounded knee" (23).

This excerpt gives me words for making sense of and assembling an understanding of how the stories and bodies of this project fit together (and sometimes don't fit). Just tonight, a group participant from *Ex-ex-gay* posted that he and his long-time partner are now married in New York under new marriage equality laws. Nearly all of the participants in this study "liked" the post. Sure, anyone can "like" a Facebook post, but I'd argue that together we've

built a way of knowing and speaking back to institutional forces that we all understand—our bodies are connected through what we've all lived—and that is recognizable to those outside the online community. It's hard to separate "my" project methodology from the relationships I've built with the folks I've come to know.

I don't want this section to turn into a literature review of the things I read in my methodologies course. Here, I'll talk about what I did and what happened along the way through a story of events and relationships because that's more theory than anything I could cite. That, and I believe what this section offers pedagogically is more rich when told than when trying to "sound like" the methodology genre.

When I started this project, I was really only close to one of my participants. Two years ago in 2010, when I was just learning about research and relationships, that was a good thing for me. Distance, we often remind ourselves as researchers, is a good thing, yes? A year later at *CCCCC* 2011 at my queer methodologies panel, I nearly got into a debate with a woman who claimed no one on our panel had enough distance with our participants. Needless to say, my position has changed over time. Distance has never been possible in this project, especially given, as I said before, that I'm in the group.

So, this is the part where I tell my audience what I did exactly. The technical side of things will show that I went through institutional review board approval at Michigan State University, as I was required. I took a methodologies course (AL870) specific to my discipline, I wrote a dissertation prospectus reviewed by my PhD guidance committee, I spent hours with my chair thinking through, conceptualizing questions for, and talking about humane, feminist, gay-friendly interviewing methods and methodologies. I wrote many

drafts of interview questions, a participant recruitment message, and a consent form. These last three things were most important to me because by the time I was writing them, I wanted my participants to know that I cared enough about them that I'd taken the time to think through these things. These three parts were about the continuation and fostering of an already-established but sometimes budding trust. In each case, I brought my own voice into each document. I had models that guided me, but ultimately I wanted each document (especially the interview questions) to sound humane and "like me." Thus, I used conversational language and tone in all documents. The official phase took place when I sent all of my materials to MSU's IRB. By mid-Spring 2011, I was IRB-approved and able to begin recruiting participants. Because the group was online and many potential participants were scattered through the U.S. and overseas, the IRB approved my request to get electronic confirmations from participants. That is, I could send a consent form and accompanying documents to a password-protected email account, where they could then electronically "sign" their consent form, view their documents, and send the consent form back to my password-protected email account.

I had two "participants" before I ever started the project. Because I'd joined the online group years earlier, most of the folks in my project knew me long before I was working on a dissertation project. They knew me as a graduate student who'd grown up around and lived these kinds of ex-gay experiences and who was now researching it. I never had to out myself to participants, nor to anyone in the online group who showed interest. Frankly, two of the four eventual participants had given me electronic confirmation that they'd like to be a part of a project long before I actually had a project. A selection process

happened by default. In March 2011, I asked Michael to post my call for participants to the message board of the group with an abridged version on the group's wall.

Michael immediately, enthusiastically, and officially agreed to participate in the project, as did Alex, but Alex wasn't one of the two original pre-participants I mentioned earlier. I didn't know Alex prior to sending out the recruitment message. But we soon started talking online. The other person who'd asked to be part of the project actually didn't inquire into my recruitment call. Once Michael sent the initial call, I felt both relieved and nervous. To be honest, I didn't scheduled interviews with these two men right away, nervous because they were such prominent activists. Michael was currently shooting an Oprah Winfrey Network special with Lisa Ling to be televised that May of 2011, and Alex was just such a beautiful soul with an activist heart. I was intimidated, worried that I only appeared an activist via dissertation research. By late April, I had four participants and began scheduling the interviews. In each case, I sent and received back the consent form and provided a copy of the questions I'd be asking as well as an overview of the project.

I conducted interviews via telephone and recorded them with an application on my Macbook called *Garage Band*. In each case, I called my participants using Skype's landline-calling function, whereby I used only audio, not video. I called each participant a few minutes before the interview on my cell phone to ensure they were still comfortable with the process, to answer any questions they had, and to describe again the full process of interviewing, reading to them the full consent form clause I'd written. Given that each participant had received and returned consent forms and read the interview questions weeks ahead of time, none of the participants had questions or concerns at the time of the

interviews.

Describing Methods

As noted above, the primary method I used for this project was dialogic interview. That is, I wrote IRB-approved interview questions, but the questions were merely a guide that led to and elicited conversations. I read three books before I started interviews, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (Reinhartz, 1992), *Interviewing as Qualitative Research* (Seidman, 2006), and *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Creswell, 2007), to prepare me for the process. That said, I didn't really understanding the interviewing process until, well, now. And if given the opportunity to do it all again, I'm sure my process would be no less messy. That said, the messiness is where I've found my most interesting threads. Researchers like Adele Clarke in her book *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn* (2005) speak to the importance of recognizing the "embodiment and situatedness of all knowledge producers, and assuming the simultaneous 'truths' of multiple knowledges" as well as a focus, most importantly, on a postmodern turn away from "simplifying normativities and homogeneity" in order to embrace "complexities, differences, and heterogeneities" (19). From this text, I learned to embrace messiness, for people never said what I thought they would, what I expected, or what I envisioned. When I first received my transcriptions back (I had them transcribed in June 2011), I was fearful that I didn't have any good information, but as I kept reading and "listened for" (Monberg, 2008) what the relationships with my participants revealed about the interviews, the interviewees, and about the larger situation (as Clarke might call it), I was able to see the rhetorics happening.

Interpreting My Data

Late in my dissertation-writing process, I was consulting regularly with my colleague and friend Madhu Narayan on her dissertation. We both expressed an active avoidance of projects that simply apply already-canonical rhetorical terms to rhetorical situations of study. While there are moments in this dissertation that I do, indeed, do that, I've tried, as she and I talked about during those writing sessions, to make sure that I'm looking at, listening for, and recognizing rhetorical moments that arise out of the stories. Later, I will, indeed, mention and deconstuct *ethos* related to bodies and rhetorics, but will do so in order to complicate this rhetorical term. Ultimately, though, my interpretative method was listening for tropes and threads that arose from the stories. Here, I define tropes as cultural iterations, whether lived, performed, and/or uttered, that make meaning about a community; tropes, when bridged with other rhetorical methods, afford folks connections to other community bodies via these iterations. Tropes don't function the same with every iteration, but ultimately represent patterns that point back to the meaning-making constructs of the community at hand. The tropes I heard most frequently and with most passion centered on participants' relationships to their audiences (namely their audience's potential rehabilitations), relationships to telling difficult stories, and relationships to queering "knowledge" about people who've undergone reparative or conversion therapy.

Tracing Theoretical, Practical, and Personal Lenses

I identify three primary queer theorists who, first and foremost, impacted the way I understand my project's form and function. The queer theorist and rhetorician I heard in my head when I was writing, reading, researching, and interviewing was Trixie Smith. Over the

years, I've heard her say the words, "I don't like traditional," and I've listened to her. As you've probably noticed, audience, I've tried to talk to you through this dissertation. Some of the voice at particular moments sounds more academic, but especially when talking through the interview data, I've tried to use a voice and tone that was not only easy to understand, but a conversation with you. That was the model I used anyway during the interview process—conversation as a form of relationship-building—so I've used such a voice and tone to build a relationship with you (hence, the use of second-person pronouns here and at other moments). A frame I've used, then, is writing much of this dissertation as it was a theory or pedagogy conversation I was having with Trixie on Tuesday afternoons in her writing center office. When I think of teachers who are influential rhetoricians, I think of her. Because this project and its stories are both theoretical *and* pedagogical, I envision that my audiences could learn best when we're "just talking through theory and pedagogy," like I do when Trixie and I talk every week. So, audience, I'll do my best just to talk with you and invite to think and theorize with me.

When I first read Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal*, I saw this kind of "talking through theory" in practice. When he writes, I see a conversation. I don't see an academic performance (for the most part). He's using words like "ideology" but in everyday contexts, especially when, for instance, he talks about gay men's preoccupation with bottom-shame—or the ways that gay men fear and denounce perceivably "feminized" receptive gay male sex due to internalized homophobia. When I write today, I know that he's a person who's writing and style I inevitably emulate. He's a person, like me, who straddles gay male communities and academia, and his awareness of this positionality impacts how he writes. If

Trixie is the person I envision myself "talking to" as I write, then Warner is the person I see myself "writing like."

During my MA, I read Patti Lather's and Chris Smithies' *Troubling the Angels: Women Living with AIDS* and knew that I'd eventually structure a project around these authors' form and arrangement. The dialogue that their work invokes impacts how I saw my dissertation when I first began writing. The authors use a double-sided notebook form for their work. I knew I wanted to write a dissertation that reflected the dialogic work of their project, and while I've not modeled their exact form, I've, instead, hoped to elicit a similar strategy when speaking with participants. The difference in our work primarily rests in the fact that I wrote myself into the voices and that I share many experiences with my participants. Their work showcases stories of women living with AIDS with their researcher "voice" arranged with a discursive split (hence, the double-sided notebook approach) on the page. In my writing, I write, speak, and theorize with my participants on the page without any intentional split in pagination.

If I continue to position my research vision in the discipline, I think of rhetoric & writing scholars Malea Powell, Julie Lindquist, and Blake Scott immediately in terms of their impact on my work. In "Listening to Ghosts: An Alternative (Non)Argument," Powell theorizes about the "ghosts who appear in the stories we tell each other here in the academy" (12). For Powell,

> ghosts stories are **both** stories of the material colonization **and** the webs and wisps of narrative that are woven around, underneath, behind, inside, and against the dominant narratives of scholarly discourse. I think a lot about what ghost stories can

> teach us, how telling them I might honor **both** the knowledge that isn't honored in universities and do so in a way that interweaves these stories with more recognizable academic 'theorizing' as well (12).

Here, Powell draws attention to the embedded relationships between the spoken-written and the unspoken-unwritten bodies (read: erased, refused, unheard). Her balance of critical theory, personal reflection, and non-fiction writing enact the kind of rhetorical moves that I've extended to my project: because I plan for my dissertation to first take this academic, traditional form, then be revised for differing genres for non-academic audiences, I find Powell critical in helping me disrupt and revise academic genres. I say this because my participants and I are thinking about broader audiences for this project. Michael has already filmed and produced online anti-Exodus videos, but he's famous. We're trying to get as many "non-famous" voices out there as possible (me, my participants, and others).

For me, the "ghosts" surrounding my project are bodily, historical, and spiritual: ex-gay rhetoric impacts bodies not only discursively by physiologically and spiritually. I hope my scholarship both now and when revised for non-academic audiences can reclaim and rewrite erased bodies. The impact of modernism, science, and medicine on sexed bodies, namely non-normative sexed bodies, continues to impact modern-day knowledge about sexualities, identities, and acts. As Foucault mentions, at the turn of the twentieth-century, these discourses create species and Others to accommodate the self, the identity, and a free market that impact definitions of nationalism, capitalism, citizenship, and family. Within these historical nuances, bodies live, have lived, and have been erased. Bodies continue to exist in a hybrid borderland between what Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender* calls the "livable" and

"unlivable" life: some lives are materially sanctioned; others, deemed unrecognizable (21). My dissertation, I hope, recovers and recognizes bodies lost over time and bodies that fade from existence as I write. So many bodies are lost in the discourse of things like, say, ex-gay conferences and hunting trips with fathers and uncles.

In *A Place To Stand: Politics and Persuasion in a Working-Class Bar*, Julie Lindquist examines situational meaning-making through working-class bar patrons' rhetorical *topoi*. By investigating a local site through the means of ethnographic research, Lindquist theorizes, as an insider, the dynamics of rhetorics at work within a particular geographic site. In my work, I find Lindquist's study a rich site for theorizing the impact of space upon rhetorical practice. Her ability to communicate with academic audiences about the sophisticated rhetorical practices of a historically marginalized group—the working-class—enables a proactive space for renegotiating how erased bodies utilize communicative decisions to make meaning and solidifying identity. In the tradition of Patti Lather's *Troubling the Angels: Women Living with HIV & AIDS*, Lindquist's participants' voices are made to speak for themselves. While she does grapple with their voices, her theorizations are collaborative spaces: rhetorically-savvy reflexivity is embedded in her words. Never does her audience feel "reported to"; rather, Lindquist opens space for her audiences to negotiate meaning. In my dissertation, I hope voices speak for themselves, for I'm aware of the power and importance of reflexive research methodologies.

In *Risky Rhetoric: AIDS and the Cultural Practices of HIV Testing*, Blake Scott examines a seemingly "neutral" HIV at-home testing kits by addressing written, fragmented, and erased bodies' interactions with these artifacts. Highlighting the impact of rhetorical-cultural and

discursive-material lenses, Scott sheds light on the disciplining nature of HIV-testing: its cultural grounding, its ethics, and its fixation on non-normative and normative bodies through linguistic, instructional, and pictoral representations. Scott's focus on disrupting rhetorical "neutralities"—ultimately, queering public discourses and practices—inspires me to use my dissertation as a vehicle for the further dismantling of "knowledge": within the frame of my project, genders, sexualities, histories, sciences, and religions are far from neutral discourses. In reality, these "neutralities" are discourse-central and power-elite-constructed. As a minority rhetorician, I must communicate to both academic and non-academic audiences the sophistication to which "normal" becomes written across public discourses eliciting a series of "truths" that make meaning. As a gay man, like Scott, I understand the importance of positioning myself in my research and knowing how I might help, assist, and support gay communities, where "truths" often pervade our everyday lives; often, our awareness of how are bodies are written for us (a DuBoisian "double consciousness") is critical for revising dominant narratives written for and about "us."

My dissertation grapples with, challenges, revises, and recovers material bodies. For, as I mentioned above, to study and theorize about rhetoric only within traditional interpretations is to do injustice to rhetoric's possibilities. I've worked with people, with lives, with bodies, with stories—with rhetorics, cultures, and epistemologies at the center of my investigations. This project relies on a rhetoric, a method, and a methodology that disrupts historical, cultural, and epistemological "truths."

Rhetorics and Queernesses as Heuristics

Rhetoric acts as a heuristic for this project. I define rhetoric, first and foremost, as plural—more than one. In citing this plurality, I recognize rhetoric as identity- and meaning-making systems connected to cultural positions and communities. I see rhetoric as intensely married to human experiences of argumentation and how these argumentations are joined to real bodies that desire to be seen and heard in the world. In our field, rhetoric and *the* rhetorical tradition are defined through a particular disciplinary lens—for *the* rhetorical tradition is often defined within Greco-Roman contexts. Often, because of the way this Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition has surfaced in our discipline's intellectual history, we often cite only *one* tradition—one disciplinary tome, one way of knowing, understanding, and interpreting. Certainly, this tradition reflects a culture's meaning practices, but these particular traditions offer only a narrow view of rhetorics and rhetorical possibilities. Here, I will draw from two contexts as heuristics: one of which is highly canonical through the Greco-Roman concept of *ethos*, which offers a specific, canonical context for this project's rhetorical theories—for I do believe that rhetoric is tied to one's positionality and subsequently examined, "credible" body with the infrastructures he inhabits. As rhetors and writers, we constantly negotiate our bodily presence and its interactions and consequences within rhetorical contexts. The concept of *ethos* is often simplified to a rhetor's bodily reputation within an institutional or recreational frame, so as to establish a recognizable, respectable body by interacting with bodies not his own. Conversely, I argue that garnering this bodily recognition intersects with establishing an *ethos* within the rhetor's body to impact other bodies. That is, *ethos* starts in the rhetor's body, not vice versa with an eye toward

bodily recognition. *Ethos*, then, I will argue later, begins with a rhetor's awareness of a particular social injustice, which is followed by a subsequent move to challenge, influence, and impact outside bodies, with the intent to garner a collective *ethos*, which both offers stories and revises narratives to elicit change, as I will argue in later chapters through analyzing the rhetorical practices of these men. That said, I'll not often refer to rhetorical moments that arise out of this study as *ethos*. As I've said previously, I listen for and identify *a* rhetoric that emerges from this project rather than from Greco-Roman definitions with inherent limitations grounded in a community's bodies and practices that don't reflect those of the men in my project. The men in the project, myself included, can't be easily relegated to a particular rhetorical tradition or to discipline-specific rhetorical devices related to Aristotelian tenets. In rhetorical moments that certainly reflect a kind of *ethos*, though, these men rely the handing down of stories, the building of relationships, and the construction of identity to communicate with audiences, to change stories, and to evoke and transmit activisms, for these practices are similar to *ethos* but are related to the building of communities, of identities, and of alternative rhetorics that disrupt dominant stories.

Secondly, I also see further possibilities for defining rhetoric beyond antiquity. In her work, Malea Powell articulates that rhetoric is a short-hand referring to the study of meaning-making systems within particular cultural frames—all cultures have rhetorical systems and practices that can be studied and understood as part of a rhetorical tradition, a tenet I apply to the online culture I study in this project. Here, though, I bridge queer theory with rhetoric as a means for further defining my project's connection to rhetoric and to theorize and implement my own definition for the purposes of this project. What a queer

rhetoric affords is not simply a disciplinary, academic language and practice, but a rhetorical awareness that encapsulates a marginalized group's push for cultural visibility by inciting non-dominant knowledges and ways of being. A queer rhetoric acts as a heuristic for activism that equips marginalized bodies with ways to articulate ways of knowing, experiencing, and living. Bodies at the margins often do not have the language to speak about the things we are feeling: we just have a feeling—a nagging that there is a different way of being. A queer rhetoric, then, is a heuristic for envisioning non-dominant ways of knowing, thinking, seeing, interpreting, and ultimately, living, while giving life and words to these bodies. Its disruptive capacity is what allows a rhetoric *to be* queer and *to* queer.

While I don't envision queering and queerness as only existent in the academy, I find it necessary for this project to locate these terms at their disciplinary roots (though, it could be argued that queerness has been enacted and performed throughout history, though not called such). A key text in the queer theory field, Annamarie Jagose's 1996 text *Queer Theory: An Introduction* claims that "queer is designated as not only the evolutionary extension of a more conventional lesbian and gay studies but also its bent progenitor" offering that "queer [is] the source rather than the destination of lesbian and gay studies" (5). While this represents an early text in the field of Queer Theory, yet no less prominent for its early work in Queer Studies, the possibilities for queerness are not yet fully articulated, as they still are not, nor will ever be. Jagose's text, while rich with rhetorical and bodily possibilities, locates queerness mostly in the realm of gay and lesbian bodies. Conversely, Nikki Sullivan's 2003 work, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, marks a less stable definition through which she seeks inclusion of other voices, practices, and disruptions apart from sexual minorities: "this

book aims to consider critiques of normalizing ways of knowing and of being that may not always initially be evident as sex-specific" (vi). Here, I extend Sullivan's primary claim to a queer rhetoric because a queer rhetoric does not solely work for queers, gays, lesbians, fags, dykes, and the rest of us, nor does it function as a cultural critique of sex, sexualities, and sexual identities, but is the manifestation of a heuristic, a cultural and bodily tool, for cultural disruption.

I turn to Ruth Goldman's "Who Is That *Queer* Queer? Exploring Norms Around Sexuality, Race, and Class in Queer Theory?" to understand that "rhetoric operates to produce a normative discourse within queer theory, which in turn serves to limit, in the words of Gloria Anzaldua, 'the ways in which we think about being queer'" (83). Goldman argues that "if we truly want to create theories that will enable us to eradicate homophobia and heterosexism, we must understand the ways in which they are linked to all [race, class, ability] systems of oppression and undertake discourses that seek to undermine/expose that entire system" (90). Here, Goldman queers queerness and queer theories, for if we seek to disrupt dominant narratives, we must, in turn, recognize that queering is a process without an end. Queerness, then, continuously shifts, evolves, and moves. Queerness does not sleep; it does not lay stagnant, nor does it rest upon one definition, but enacts, seeks, disrupts normative practices, ideologies, and institutions through cultural activism *and* through application of queerness *to* queering practices.

To enact this fluid yet constant rhetorical process, we must continue to tell, share, and listen to stories, a major tenet of this project. In *The Truth About Stories*, Thomas King "[tells] the stories not to play on your sympathies but to suggest how stories can control our

lives, for there is a part of [him] that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of [him] that will be chained to these stories as long as [he lives]" (9). King's passage notes a relationship that bodies have to stories. In some cases, we tell the stories; in other cases, the stories are told for and about us (notice my passive construction). GLBTQ people must cautiously tell stories and vehemently listen for what stories about us do *to* and *for* us, as we can see from accounts in western media. We, as gay folks, must pay careful attention to the ways in which writing grounded in dominant stories aids in the creation of truths. While easy to locate hegemony in the past, queer rhetoricians must also locate a call-to-action in the present. As a gay male rhetorician, I will fight for the eradication of dominant narratives that seek to call me a cock-sucker, a faggot, a queen, a butch, an abomination. That said, I want to re-tell the story, for I *am* a cock-sucker, a faggot, a queen, a butch, an abomination (if I were not a cultural abomination, I would not feel the need to speak out and my life, in my opinion, would have a different meaning). But I want to tell my own version of my story; I want to queer what these names can and do mean—for that is what rhetoric is for this project and for me.

The Project & Its Design

In the early 2000s, rhetoric scholars like Malea Powell, Julie Lindquist, and Blake Scott, scholars I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, sought to disrupt narratives of the field by offering new definitions of writing. While the field has historically given precedence to *the* rhetorical tradition grounded in Greco-Roman histories of language and culture (read: Aristotle, Plato, and a series of canonical texts arising from a power elite), rhetoric scholars establish space outside of *the* canon seeking not only to disrupt the traditional text but to

understand relationships between rhetorics and cultures. This project offers different lenses beyond Greco-Roman rhetorical interpretations. I seek to push the field to address how rhetorical practices revise grand narratives about GLBTQ identities, a topic often glossed over in Rhetoric & Composition scholarship and practice. Further, I hope this dissertation will push the field to have conversations that are slightly, if not very, uncomfortable. These stories are uncomfortable for me, too, which is, perhaps, a reason, if not *the* reason, why I write.

Little scholarship has directly addressed either the ex-gay or the ex-exgay movement and its rhetorical implications, approaches, affordances, and limitations. In May 2008, Chanon Adsanatham, a PhD student at Miami University of Ohio, presented a thread of ex-gay research at the *Rhetoric Society of America Conference* in Seattle, Washington. To this date, his rhetorical analysis of an *Exodus International* artifact, an instructional ex-gay CD-Rom, represents the only scholarship that exists in our field, other than my MA thesis. Only texts grounded in social sciences and cultural studies have covered this ground. In the tradition of the rhetoricians I mention above, my project contributes to Rhetoric & Writing scholarship by offering further possibilities for cultural rhetorics as a disciplinary heuristic. I hope to offer a GLBTQ *rhetoric* project; *few* projects in our field offer discussion about GLBTQ rhetorical investigation, while *many* pose theorizations about writing classrooms and pedagogies (Alexander, 2008; Alexander, Banks, Marinara, & Blackmon, 2008; Winans, 2006; Goncalves, 2005; Elliot, 1996; Malinowitz, 1995). This is not one of those projects.

In the following chapters, I will theorize about how these rhetorical moments play out through these stories. In *Chapter 3: GLQ Rhetorical Responsibilities: Impacting Audiences*, I answer

the question "How are responsibilities rhetorical?" then moves on to frame the intersections between responsibilities, rhetorics, and bodies. In *Chapter 4: GLQ Rhetorical Responsibilities: Telling Sexual Stories*, I examine how participants share emotionally trying stories in order to build community with other rhetors and activists and to incite dialogue with oppositional forces. For participants, offering these stories to specific audiences builds a rhetorical framework for advocating against ex-gay institutions. As participants and I argue, outside audiences can hold to conservative belief systems, but stories, especially when intimate and difficult to hear, are nearly impossible to ignore. Here, we argue that pain and pleasure stories may, indeed, dismantle the entire ex-gay arena—a practice reflective of other GLQ historical moments. In *Chapter 5: GLQ: Rhetorical Responsibilities: Queering Grand Narratives*, I look at how participants' stories disrupt grand sexuality narratives not only about ex-gays & ex-ex-gays but also LGBTQ identities. I first define what I mean by an ex-gay or ex-ex-gay grand narrative, then unpack and queer it based on participants' stories, arguing that participants do this kind of queering as a form of activism. In *Chapter 6: So, What* Can *Ex-Ex-Gays Teach Us About Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Rhetorics*, I conclude with my final assemblance of a GLQ rhetoric and its local and global implications.

Chapter 3:
GLQ Rhetorical Responsibilities:
Impacting Audiences

How are responsibilities rhetorical?: Jack's Practices of "Unraveling"

To answer this question, I first look to Jack. When I talked to him about his audiences and to whom and for what reasons he tells his stories, he said:

> I would try to tell someone my stories and help them really understand what I mean. I've even thought about talking to the people that I went to church with and even like the minister to try to change his thinking about [being gay] being wrong and trying to change his beliefs and try to convince some of these people. I believe they're good people; I think they're just misinformed. I think there's fear and I think lack of education is a big problem. And I've actually thought about approaching some of these people and saying, "you know, I understand your thinking and your beliefs, and here I am and I'm still a good person, you know, I don't break the law; I'm a law-abiding citizen. I attend church. I read my bible daily. And I'm gay, but, you know, it's not the unraveling of society." And I think those would be the people I would want to tell my stories to. As much as I would like to condemn them and tell them that they need to stop preaching hate and just making people feel guilty for who they are instead of trying to get people to move to a higher plane and become a better person and not trying to change who they are and basically condemning them. I think those people I would probably want to go to at some point and try to – you know, I don't know if you're ever going to change that with those people.

Here, Jack points to a material activism of approaching audiences he's once encountered, whether in his church or based on his experiences. Jack's career in law enforcement, no doubt, informs his stories and his rhetorical approaches. He makes his audiences aware of his role as a model citizen. While I know Jack to be highly informed about rhetorics of institutions that privilege model citizenship through problematic understandings of "morality," he's also using the language of the right to make a point: he's not the "deviant" – the narrative "character" – in a grand narrative about gay people. In light of the 1973 American Psychological Association's declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness and the 2003 Lawrence v. Texas ruling, where sodomy was no longer a criminalized, pathologized offense in Texas legislature, Jack, an astute rhetorician and civil servant (through his career in law enforcement), doesn't merely mention this citizenship by chance. He's aware that pointing back to the fact that being gay is not an illness reminds audiences lost in archaic, homophobic discourses of a distinct reality—gay people aren't sick and aren't deviant. Employing language of the right that relies on science to make meaning, Jack "disidentifies"[17] (Munoz 4) in order to offer a rhetorical strategy that affords his opposing audiences a look into how seemingly "air-tight," argumentative techniques can be disrupted. Jack's repetition of the "law-abiding citizen" isn't without purpose, for he's aware that in order to revise stories, he also has to tell new ones, a task that all participants in this project take on. Ironically, telling new stories *does* "unravel society" as he mentions, but not in the manner we might anticipate. The manner in which conservative cultures are being unraveled

[17] I use queer theorist Jose Munoz's definition of disidentification here. Munoz argues that queer people use the discourses available to them in order to speak back to oppressive forces. Sometimes – in fact, often – those discourses are also the strategies of oppressors.

by stories like his, indeed, reflects a disruption of dominant, homophobic discourses. Society is "in danger" of unraveling, much to the GLQ advantage. Jack's concept of "unraveling" mirrors many of the meaning-making, activist strategies of the men in this project, for "unraveling" is a rhetorical method that threads through this entire dissertation.

For the people in this project, responsibilities are never far from, if not synonymous with, storytelling practices intended to invoke conversation and interrupt homophobia. I define responsibilities as, first and foremost, rhetorical acts, whether spoken or unspoken. Here, responsibilities are story-telling performances that anticipate necessary messages to audiences in need of hearing—whether in response to implicit or explicit homophobic discourse, or as reactions to brotherly or sisterly advocates or frighteningly dismissive opponents. A responsibility, then, in this case is related to a rhetorician's *ethos* within a systemic network of audiences in need of hearing stories. From my data, "the audience in need of hearing" is more often than not "an opponent" of sorts, whether on a political issue or from each rhetorician's lived experiences with homophobia. These rhetoricians, my participants, are aware of arguments necessitating revision. They exhibit a keen eye toward recognizing storytelling responsibilities that assist in reconstructing opposing rhetoricians' stories grounded in outwardly and internalized homophobic stances. Ultimately, these rhetoricians recognize a network that "chips away" at homophobic western institutions that will never be entirely undermined but that can be interrupted through stories.

From this vision, a systemic network is made up of rhetoricians, narratives, and narrative revisions. That is, rhetorical responsibilities are systemic transferences between audiences through which people – ex-exgays – aren't telling depressing stories, or victim

narratives, if you will, but seeking to revise stories and their re-tellings through networks of rhetoricians. This process isn't simply re-telling stories or giving perspectives, but the process of interrupting and intervening in the ways stories are told. For instance, an activist rhetorician tells a story to an audience out of a sense of responsibility, perceiving that an audience needs to hear a story. The rhetorician's responsibility, then, is disorientation, or telling stories that disorient the audience from one narrative. These rhetoricians disorient and, perhaps, reorient their audiences toward other stories or toward their audience's retellings of those stories for their own audiences. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed investigates the "orientation" of bodies in time and space within institutions. Her primary argument is that cultural landscapes create lines that guide us. At first, the lines might appear to be guiding paths, but they have real consequences for how we name, understand, and negotiate meaning about ourselves as GLBTQ people (and for all people). To deviate from the lines is to make a bodily decision, as a deviation is not "merely" straying from a path but engaging defiance with bodily consequences. Through stories, the activist rhetorician, then, is aware of the highly embedded, "guiding" homophobic narrative—one that, perhaps, offers a grand narrative about gay people. In this awareness, the rhetorician is responsible for telling stories that disorient and revise. Here, there is metaphorical, material, and rhetorical movement away from a dominant text.

Lynn Weber's arguments in *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework* afford me a lens for theorizing about possible, realistic outcomes for these systemic networks, for I don't mean to imply an utopian vision of GLQ rhetorical responsibilities' capabilities. In her text, she highlights theoretical and practical intersections

among race, class, gender, and sexuality and their impact on western culture and its oppressive ideologies. I look to her final arguments for recognizing networks and audiences, some of which and of whom may be aligned with *and* apart from an activist rhetorician. In closing her discussion, she extends "a vision of social justice" that acts as a pseudo-solution and application for her praxis-based theorizations:

> a vision, a dream for a just society [...]; a deep understanding of oppression contextually grounded in time and place […]; and action that is motivated by a vision of justice and a deep understanding of oppression and that is taken in principled group coalitions that understand and respect differences while pursuing common goals (213).

When I imagine rhetorical possibilities of what GLQ rhetorics and their traditions do for GLQ culture and for all cultures, this "coalition" is what I envision. That is, I don't mean to imply that the network is a vehicle for befriending and thus changing all audiences; however, networked storytelling affords opposing audiences an awareness of oppression and affords them a venue for revising their own stories.

Further, when I spoke with Brent, I understood that he recognizes that offering the following story provides material and hypothetical audiences a vehicle for revision:

> […] I tell [stories], right – like there's this story about my crazy anti-gay aunt and uncle who – my uncle sent me the same anti-gay Christmas card two years in a row and – no clue like why he decided that a Christmas card was the right place to put his feelings out there. All I had done was send a Christmas card to them saying "Merry Christmas and I hope you're well," and what I got back was "Merry Christmas to you

too, I hope that the Lord helps you get your head screwed on straight soon." To me, this was really funny because it was at a time when I had cousins in that same family who were going to jail, and I was just like, okay, really, are you kidding me?

I'm paying my taxes and holding down a job and have finished my college degree and you're gonna talk to me about getting my head screwed on straight when these cousins were in jail and having children out of wedlock and – so I don't know. Those stories – but those stories are absolutely crucial because when I tell people about some of the things I've endured over the years, like getting a freaking Christmas card from somebody telling me that they hope that God won't send me straight to Hell, I mean, that's a moment for a lot of people, no matter how conservative they are, no matter how Christian they are, when they're just like, oh, my God, you know, like you went through that.

Here, Brent tells me the story—me, an insider. Utilizing the Christmas card discussion in order to communicate with potentially skeptical or oppressive audiences contributes to a hypothetical audience's rhetorical awareness. Regardless of an audience's religious background, Brent realizes his audiences will understand the "element of surprise" he experienced. Cards, normally intimate moments between thoughtful parties, aren't spaces to "lower-the-boom" on a family member. Brent's story points back to a tradition not terribly far removed from him. While he doesn't point to a life-or-death situation, he does make GLQ folks think about how oppressive institutions infiltrate in micro-level gestures that reflect larger institutional forces that, like D'Emilio argues, signal back to "systemic," macro-level oppressions that "[expose] the complex ways in which it is tied to a host of other

injustices" (30). Further, in this network, we have two rhetoricians: Brent and his homophobic uncle. Brent's uncle offers one narrative of sexuality—a homophobic one. On the other hand, Brent once listened to the story, was impacted by it, now listens to the story with an activist ear, as a thoughtful, purposeful rhetor. He's not telling the story just to tell it, just so his audiences know he went through it. On the contrary, he hopes his audiences will listen to his words and re-think the stories they've heard, been told, or that reflect his uncle's.

Reflecting on why he tells stories and envisioning his networks, he tells me:

> I've told these stories a lot, but I also think it depends on who I tell them to because I think in the gay world – and even beyond the gay world, like in the progressive, liberal gay-friendly world, in the secular world, and in the progressive, liberal gay Christian world, these stories have a little bit of cache. There's a little bit of respect you can get from people when you say, "oh, I grew up like really conservative Baptist and I actually shoplifted gay porn, and then that was found out by my parents, and then I was sent off to counseling to deal with it," and there's a certain ooh-and-ah factor from people where they're just like, "oh, wow, you really have been through things." And I think in those moments, like it almost makes you like – in the eyes of people that you know, it makes you – not a more real gay because anyone that says they're gay is identifying as gay, but I think it's like the way veterans get medals, it's like a moment where you tell people like, "oh, I went through all of this and I still ended up as this well-adjusted gay man as an adult." Like, it really literally is like this respect you get from people who are like, "wow, you went through a lot and you still

became like a well-adjusted gay man as an adult."

In telling these stories to people in the "gay world," he talks about gaining "respect," but also an *ethos*, similar to Jack's "law-abiding citizenship," for Brent seeks for his audiences – gay, straight, and in-between – to understand that he's, first and foremost, a person—a body. Brent's "well-adjusted gay man" and Jack's "law-abiding citizenship" push audiences to de-vilify gay bodies. These stories speak to the moments where we, as GLQ people, have to say "yes, homophobic audience X or internally-homophobic GLQ audience X, we've heard that story. We've heard the story where gay people are sick, sad, and molesting children, but well, fuck that story." In this case, both Brent and Jack are speaking from respectable positions (law enforcer and graduate student/teacher) and thus use the stories, but also their own bodies, to speak back to homophobic narratives grounded in making the GLQ body a site of oppression and pathology. Here, I see two narratives, though: one narrative that each of these men disrupts is focused on the oppressive, homophobic audience. Brent, however, also speaks back to his GLQ audiences, addressing the tendency that marginalized folks have of living and believing the outwardly-constucted, homophobic grand narratives. He enlivens within his GLQ-identities' audiences and networks a firm reminder that gay people aren't, well, crazy and sick; they're actually "well-adjusted." Thus, he reminds networks nearest him of the same stories he tells outside, homophobic audiences.

Continuing, Brent says:

> I think the stories are absolutely crucial. I mean, if I don't have the stories, then – it's one thing for me to say to somebody, "okay, no, I don't wanna be straight or I don't wanna try to be straight, I wanna be gay." It's one thing to just say that, but it's

> another thing to tell somebody, "okay, I had years of doing this or I spent years of my life single and alone and unhappy," and then they have this moment where they're like, "oh, my God, I would never want that for myself or for my child, how could I ask that of you?"

Further, he envisions this hypothetical audience to whom he will and has told this story and imagines his audience's response will, of course, be what he says: "oh, my god, you know, like you went through that" ("Brent"). Here, a systemic network opens possibility, whereby there's possibility to tell new, different stories. The first rhetorician, Brent's uncle, will, perhaps, stand by a homophobic understanding of GLQ identity, but Brent, conversely, has the power to imagine another network of rhetoricians for whom this story will bring new meaning and possibility. When Brent hypothesizes about *an* audience here, his speaking for this audience ("how could I ask that of you") signals that this hypothetical utterance is grounded in experience. We can't necessarily know the outcome of this network, but can look to Brent as a rhetorician who seeks to tell stories for rhetorical purposes meant to invoke thought and narrative revision. Here, he recognizes other rhetoricians in a network—some of whom, like his perceived audiences, he can help with narrative revision; others, like his uncle, whose stories he likely can't help to revise. His *ethos*, then, is situated around not just his own body, but the bodies he can potentially impact in a perceived network.

GLQ Rhetorical Responsibilities & Arguments Grounded in Identities & Ideologies

When relating rhetorical responsibilities to GLQ communities, I trace this idea to Urvashi Vaid's conversations about grassroots politics. Through a speech aimed at the critique of identity-based and issue-based movements, Vaid deconstructs identity politics

through the lens of the Asian Pacific American subjecthood. She values ideology-based politics, arguing that identity-based movements are historically not well organized by suggesting that "because of the way we are structured – issue by issue, or identity by identity – social justice movements cannot boast the kind of ideological or political unity that is found on the conservative right" (249). Vaid's work suggests that if we are to make real change, we need to take up the rhetorical moves of our "opposition." Conversely, I argue for GLQ folks to join together these political techniques. To merely write off historical tactics informed by identity seems problematic to me. We need the connection to the identity-based movement; the identity itself is what is marginalized. I push back against the idea that we need to do things the way the "right" does them, but employ Vaid as a means of thinking about GLQ rhetorical responsibility as a blending of identity and ideology-based political approaches—for especially in light of the AIDS crisis and myriad teen suicides, we haven't the luxury of seeing these two things as separate entities. Ultimately, GLQ folks never have this privilege of creating distance with their identities, for the right has such a privilege because they often inhabit normalized bodies.

In theorizing about his decisions to tell stories, Michael replies:

> I suppose part of it's cathartic. By telling the story, the emotions attached to it become less painful. Why do I tell the story? What does telling the story do? The main reason I tell stories is because I feel I have a responsibility to tell them because I think that a lot of people out there hear the word ex-gay and they think it means you're going to change your orientation, and they get their hopes up, and they put a

lot of time, money and spiritual energy into it and it doesn't happen, and they feel like failures or there's something wrong with their faith.

Michael pauses to think about his own bodily positionality when he tells stories, mentioning the emotional pain of his experiences. Focusing on the "main reason [he] tells stories," though, is his commitment to needing and having to tell them. Pointing back to D'Emilio's claims that the early AIDS crisis unraveled a series of "systemic" political injustices for GLQ people, I locate a similar thread here. We're not talking about that historic moment, but about the handed-down traditions of GLQ folks. Similar to homophobic medical and political communities, this ex-gay institution – Exodus, in this case – reflects an infrastructure that does more than simply "assist" people with spiritual and sexual "healing." Conversely, the entire institution is built on systemic manifestations of injustices done to GLQ bodies. A modernist understanding of the body, one that Michael alludes to and seeks to disrupt when he says "[people] think [ex-gay] means you're going to change your orientation," grounds this system (Bussee). If all bodies are knowable in clearly-defined terms within dominant medical and political communities, then ex-gay rhetorics are systems of oppression that rest on similar injustices as the early AIDS years. When Michael reflects on telling stories, he speaks back to an institution, but in doing so, he doesn't merely yell and scream.

Unlike Vaid, Michael utilizes an identity-based approach grounded in ideology, aware, as I am, that the two are never too far apart. That is, Michael's responsibility to tell the story is grounded in remembering his own stories – reflecting upon his own human experience – but recognizing his *ethos* in a systemic network of audiences. Let's face it: people are putting

time, energy, and resources into these ex-gay movements. A twenty-first century institution can't be separated from its drive to produce and seek capital, nor from how it uses knowledge-producing practices to ensure such capital. Story-telling practices, then, are not simply about disrupting the *ethos* of the institution, but about utilizing networks of audiences in order to unravel said institution through stories' movement across time and space. *This* is the "chipping away" method I've mentioned. While the process is slow for "unraveling" organizations and the institutions upon which they're grounded, change can and does happen. For instance, this week, I read an article from *U.S. News* about another prominent ex-gay leader, John Smid, former director of Love-in-Action, who now speaks out against the movement. Along a similar thread, Love-in-Action cut funding for its residential programs earlier this year. Garnering an *ethos* and seeking networks of other rhetoricians affords Michael agency in this process.

Further, I asked Michael about lore I'd heard from over the years, for many folks involved or disinvolved in ex-gay practices know about Michael and his former partner Gary's move to call Exodus International leaders to the carpet. As the story goes, Michael and Gary, friends and Exodus business partners, fell in love after years of traveling across the country giving ex-gay seminars. In the late 1970s, however, the two arrived at an Exodus Conference to report on their cross-country endeavors, but after a series of events, each had had his own revelation: they were in love and frankly, had no interest in continuing on with the facade. When arriving at national Exodus convention, they offered their stories—their love for one another—and spoke out against Exodus publicly instead of reporting on their cross-country ex-gay proselytizing trip.

When I've heard the story before, it exists almost as folklore. Told by ex-gay opponents almost as a love story, which it was, of two men with undying love, the lore offers a near-Ennis Del Mar-Jack Twist narrative. When I sat down with Michael during our interview, I made a specific note for myself to ask Michael about this event—whether it actually happened; if it did, to what extent. To hear Michael tell the story, I listened for and subsequently heard a different version of the story. Of course, this moment was about love for Michael and Gary. But when I listened more closely, I heard that this is a story Michael operationalizes for specific rhetorical purposes:

> Yeah, we announced it at a convention. It was 1979. We were asked to speak for the United Church of Christ Annual Meeting in Minneapolis. And it was on the plane flight there that we broke down and I told him, 'Gary, I can't do this anymore. I can't keep up this façade. You know, I'm not changing. In fact, I love you with all my heart,' and I thought he would reject me. And he broke down and said the same thing. And we decided we couldn't call ourselves ex-gay any longer. So we told the people at the conference that we could no longer in good conscience call ourselves ex-gay, and that we thought that what the church ought to do was unconditionally love and accept gay people, rather than try and change them. So that was the first time we had publically announced that – we didn't call ourselves ex-ex-gay at that time. We just told them we could no longer present ourselves this way. Then we went underground. We didn't tell anybody anything for years. It wasn't until Gary got sick with HIV that we made a decision that we needed to, time was limited and we had to tell the story.

Here, I would offer that Michael's *ethos* in the story is of direct consequence to what he calls his "good conscience." A rhetorical responsibility arises not in his vision of what the larger institution should value, but also in terms of the *kairotic* moment interspersed with Gary's health. That is, telling the story is not only about their love, but also about how their love undoes homophobic institutional values inherent in Exodus. The *kairos*, then, isn't only about telling the story before Gary's death, but because he's aware that their identities inform an ideological stance that will impact outside audiences both within and outside this story. Here, Michael abridges the "love" part of the story. Instead, he identifies a vehicle for speaking out against Exodus. This story could certainly focus on a love story; it's a perfect segue to talk about his former partner whom he loves. Speaking about his post-"underground" years, Michael mentions Gary's HIV status and the urgency surrounding their narrative offering, which this is reflective of this historical moment. What I understand about this story is that it points to a *kairos* grounded in an opportune moment to speak. Further, Michael speaks to a responsibility when he told the story both in the moment and as he tells the same story today. First and foremost, though, this is his story to tell—his identity bridges with an ideological foundation in order to interrupt a dominant political force.

Ex-exgays have much to teach GLQ and non-queer folks alike. Collectively, these men offer rhetorical models for GLQ people as well as for people who face marginalization. These models, I argue, can point GLQ people to activisms. For instance, I have a number of friends and colleagues who say things such as, "you know, I'm really not an activist," when they talk about asserting visibility in dominant culture. But yet, I know them, and they tell

me stories that counter statements like these. A gay male colleague of mine, for instance, recently corrected a bank teller gently for using a masculine pronoun to speak back to the "are-you-married-and-what's-*her*-name?" question. "Well, his name is Mike," my colleague said, then launched into a brief story about his partner and him. Gentle, subtle, yet rhetorically effective are these kinds of moves. These small articulations are stories that chip away at a dominant, hetero-centric culture. And yet these moments are overt activisms. Similarly, the primary theorists in this project, ex-exgays Michael, Alex, Brent, and Jack, aren't activists from self-proclamation (they don't self-proclaim), for holding signs at Prop 8 rallies (they didn't hold signs), or because they "occupy Wall Street" (they're not occupying Wall Street), but from how they tell stories that speak back to oppression. Their stories tell us that every articulation – every story – counts.

Chapter 4:
GLQ Rhetorical Responsibilities:
Sharing Sexual Stories

I have a love-hate relationship with gyms. Frankly, yes, these days, I'm one of those gay guys who couldn't live anywhere unless I had my choice of three to five workout facilities near my home and work. When I was 13, I started working out to make the junior high basketball team. At that early age, I was also required by coaches to work out in the local weight room. I remember feeling discomfort with these spaces even then—the grunts, the moans, the separation of the sexes, the implicit and explicit homophobia, all things that still bother and annoy me to this day. For years, I actually did all my workouts in my own room, basement, or any other personal, non-public space so as to avoid gyms. In the past few years, I've returned to these facilities.

I worked out today. As big of a part gyms are to my livelihood, I don't like being in these "manly" spaces, except to work up a sweat and get my sets in. Frankly, I roll my eyes a lot, mostly at other men, presumably straight, but curb this inclination to roll them too much, instead wearing my Human Rights Campaign shirt and donning a collection of kinda-pink pastel and bright-purple muscle shirts. Unfortunately, because of my build and due to the influx of metrosexual men's styles, my clothing decisions to set myself apart are often lost on most.

Most importantly, though, I blare non-traditional, queer[18] music in my headset at decibel-levels audible to audiences near me (think: Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, Carrie

[18] When I say "queer" here, I mean queer to the space's norms and for its audience's expectations.

Underwood, and the *Glee* cast). The thing is, I like lots of music, but with this rhetorical move, I have a few activist outcomes in mind. First, I like talking to men, of course, but I despise "gym talk"—talk that's often sprinkled, if not doused, with brinkmanship, misogyny, and homophobia. Hence, why I bring in Madonna and not my classic rock or Texas country when I compile my gym play-lists. Frankly, as an activist who believes in both small-scale and large-scale activism, I think these moments are activisms. Why? The body I inhabit is relatively muscular, I'm broad, I'm tall, and I look male (*makes a growl sound*). When I open my mouth to speak, I have a soft voice, but when people see me, they assume I "belong" in the gym. It's this belonging I try to speak back to, for despite my best efforts, I'm still often lumped into the masculine, homophobic discourses before I can intercept.

While I don't think I pass[19] in demeanor and attitude, I think my body and stature does some passing for me. For instance, last week, I was talking to a guy near me while I was doing dead-lifts (I know, I know … this chapter makes me seem anti-social, so that might come as a shock). I work out at a facility equipped with mounted televisions near the free-weights section. I zone out often at the gym, meaning I stare into space between sets, so I was staring at one of the overhead TVs without really watching. There was a game on—two southern teams. The game's footage flashed to a bossomed, brunette cheerleader bouncing. The guy near me, also paused between his set, said in my general direction, "I'd hit that. Great tits. Whadduyah think?" See, you have to understand: I'm tired. Tired of being lumped

[19] Here, I use "pass" as a verb that refers to one's "ability" to appear, look, or act "straight" or "non-gay" to vast audience, both gay, straight, and in-between. Passing isn't always about sexuality, as evidenced in novels like Nella Larsen's *Passing*, which chronicles a light-skinned black woman's "ability" to pass for a different race and ultimately class position. I find the concept of GLBTQ passing highly problematic, given GLBTQ cultures' preoccupations with this act and what passing presumably "affords" GLBTQ folks.

into these elbow-nudging conversations. I'm tired of the shame-inducing subtexts that box me into a recognizable body. When I hear questions like this, I don't mean harm; I just need a vehicle for my exhaustion. When I hear questions like this, I channel this question back to hundreds of audiences who've shamed me over the years. So, dude, to answer your narrow question: No, I don't like women. No, her "tits" aren't beautiful to me—well, not in *that* way anyway (am I an advocate of women's bodies? Of course). No, I don't have a girlfriend. And in case you're gonna ask: no, I'm not married; such an occurrence isn't currently legal in 42 states. And no, I'm not then asexual just because you're not sure what to do with me or with my response and my body.

In the moment, though, my gay/gay-friendly God (yes, for me, such a being exists, and I'd bet my pecs that he's gay) was on my side. The screen flashed from the buxom cheerleader to a shirtless fan in the crowd, painted a color I can't remember. He was cute, frankly. To the guy talking to me, I said: "nah, he's a little more my speed. I'd hit *that*." That was the polite version. The sarcastic dialogue unraveling in my head was "*well, she's not really my speed, but I'd definitely not kick* him *out of bed. Hmmm, yeah, since you're talking about tits, let's open up the conversation to cocks. I bet that painted guy has a beautiful cock. You know, the kind that're set against the backdrop of a slightly-oversized set of gorgeous balls? You know, I'm pretty versatile, too, so I'd love to fuck him, then let him fuck me. Yeah, I'd totally hit that. Can I get a high-five?"* I'm not a "can-I-get-a-high-five?" nor an "I'd-hit-that" kind of guy. But I just have these moments where I want to ask, "what gives you, straight guy, the right to ask me anything about anything? Check your privilege." Needless to say, the guy awkwardly uttered something back to me ("huh, oh …") and has never spoken to me again, even though I see him at least once a

week at the gym. Fine, I'm the gym fag. At least I got to tell my story and say my piece, right?

The thing is, the older I get the less I care about who I offend in these moments. Certainly this statement might surprise audiences who know me as a polite, soft-spoken Texan. Let me clarify, though: I mean that I'm less cautious about sharing my inner-thoughts to audiences who I think *need* to hear the stories. Frankly, I'm not afraid anymore. I spent too much of my life being polite in these moments. I'm okay with making people uncomfortable, because I've spent a lifetime being made to feel uncomfortable. I hope my story communicates that. For I've not told it today "just because" or because I like to say a few filthy things. I tell you this story, audience, because I hope I can evoke thought in you. Like the participants in this project, I want my body and its stories, both verbal and non-verbal, to tell other stories that force people to re-think grand narratives about the bodies they assumed they're surrounded by. In this story, I've been talking about presumed passing, but this storytelling has implications far beyond simply these moments. For instance, participants in this chapter share sexual stories and use words and phrases that make their audiences potentially uncomfortable—and are doing so for a reason, as responsible rhetoricians. As we've talked about in this dissertation, *Ex-ex-gay* men employ stories for audience networks who are perceivably in need of hearing stories and who these rhetoricians understand to have the ability to change the further articulations of stories. In this chapter, we'll focus on the kinds of stories these men tell—sexual, painful, uncomfortable, disorienting—for both internal and external audiences (external, like mine from the gym; internal, like within the online community) with purposeful outcomes in mind.

Tracing Relationships with Alex

The Rhetoric & Composition job market is a place that's dually impressed and uncomfortable with this project as a rhetoric story, namely how "my story" fits into it. In telephone interviews, I notice that audiences don't always want to know why I'm invested in this project, and further, I don't always want to tell them. I notice that the shameful stories or the uncomfortable pieces I unravel materialize in small bits to audiences I'm uncomfortable with and in droves with audiences with whom I'm trying to really communicate things about myself. I'm not trying to state the obvious, but to offer a rhetoric for how I think about audiences, and how I see participants negotiate with audiences. That said, in this section, I seek to trace what it means rhetorically to *withhold* a story at one moment for a particular audience, but to *disclose* to another audience at another moment. In the previous chapter, I talked about the outer audiences always needing to hear stories. In this case, though, I'd like to recontextualize such a statement. Sometimes, activists have to tell other activists things so that they can first hear each other. In listening to and for these stories, audiences are different here for these rhetoricians. Sexual, shameful stories are told for rhetorical reasons, often in order to connect with folks from the same community first in order to face, speak back to, and educate outside audiences. Some stories aren't for the outer network, but for the inner networks. I've said before that much of my dissertation interviews were about connecting with folks. I have strong opinions about how audiences function for rhetorical purposes, for the inner circle of rhetoricians must often share common stories in order to do the activist work necessary to reach outer networks.

First, I look to Alex, with whom I have a close relationship and with whom I shared many of my own stories before, during, and after speaking with him formally.

> What you need to know about me in this context is that I came from an extremely abusive home. I mean, I lived the model 1950s life on the outside, and on the inside it was something totally different, which is why I could relate so intimately with what you were talking about with being presented with an idealized family structure and how things supposedly went wrong, and this is how it went wrong, when it really bore no reality in your life.

I'd told him about my parents' divorce in the late-1990s and how it was both hard but also not, simultaneously. My family life was nothing like his, though he entrusted me with a series of stories that unpacked a larger narrative of how he made it to the doorstep of the ex-gay institution. His journey wasn't too far removed from mine. We share many threads.

> And you know, I know what that 50s thing was all about, and what people on the outside saw had nothing to do with what was taking place on the inside of my house. I mean, I still have friends today that think my parents were the most wonderful people that ever walked the face of the earth, and I just sit there and – frankly, I don't miss either one of them, and I was very happy the day that I shoveled both of them into the ground. That's the bottom line. Long story short I was gang raped as a child, and my parents did nothing to protect me. They didn't even know it happened, didn't even care. Didn't even raise an eyebrow at any changed behavior on my part in the wake. I wasn't even on their radar. I was not even fucking on their radar. No no, I have not shared that the way I shared it with you. I shared it with you on a

> much more detailed and intimate way, because I wanted to be honest with you, I wanted to let you know what I was trying to explain to you, what I was trying to tell you, so that you would understand. I would do that with certain other people – close friends and things like that, should the circumstance warrant.

Alex tells me that he's not shared this story with many audiences. I understand. I don't talk about many of my stories, either. When I talked to my advisors about my fears of exposing too much of myself on the job market, I realize that these are the kinds of things that scare me. I can talk about being gay; I've been doing that for years. I can tell folks that at one point in my life, I wanted to be straight and that I've spent parts of my life feeling ultimately uncomfortable in my own body. But what I have trouble talking about is violence. It actually took an outsider reader of this project to ask me if the story that closes this dissertation is about sexual violence to get me to finally write a more explicit narrative thread in that section. So, I get it. I hear Alex. He hears me. We're building something here, and I know it's because we have to say things to each other so that we can say other things—important things—to other people who don't know us. We have to share in order to do more sharing. He later says:

> My mother was probably wacko. I mean, I look back on her behavior now and I think to myself, "This is not a normal individual. She had mental problems." In that time, you didn't even acknowledge them let alone talk about them […] I raised myself is the bottom line. In all probabilities, my mother had multiple personality disorder. After I suffered my attack, my rape, I developed multiple personality disorder. For years I struggled with it. I struggled with post-traumatic stress for years and years. I

> couldn't even stand in line at an ATM and have somebody stand behind me too close without freaking out, without having to leave the fucking line. And sometimes leave the bank shaking because somebody was behind me. But I didn't remember what any of that was. I had no idea, because by that time I was multiple, and I was switching back and forth. There were separate identities in my head that I created as a survival mechanism that I would switch into depending on whatever presented itself. If there was a threat, then I was back into that, "Oh, my God, I'm being raped again, I've got to get out of here." And then as soon as I exited wherever it was, I flipped back – I was no longer in the stress situation – I'd flip back into another part of my mind that was separated, and again, you do it as a child. It's a mental defense mechanism. It is curable; I am cured from it now. It took me years of therapy on my own to do it, and I have integrated, but I have not retrieved a lot of memories yet. I mean, there's no reason to.

Alex shares a story with me. I feel the story with him. He knows my story. My experiences are completely different, yet similar violences have been marked on our bodies. To this day, my family doesn't know much about my experiences with violence. So there's not been a moment where I've felt like my family was covering up or ignoring my experiences, like his family has. I've not had the exact same experiences as him, but the heavy burden of remembering still plagues me. I revel in moments where I can tell people I trust. I can't tell these stories to everyone, nor can Alex, as we both disclose. We tell each other stories. Terrible stories. We tell these to remind each other that we're strong. We're still here. People might think we're "weird" or "broken" (or insert victim adjective), but we talk about this

stuff because if we can get these stories in the open, we get strength from these disclosures. From there, we have the strength to speak back to homophobic uncles and to misogynistic gym-goers. Together, as rhetoricians, Alex and I build a method for activism.

The next question is, perhaps, "how?" How *do* we build a method for activism, and when speaking to each other first in a safer space, *what* does such story-sharing accomplish? I return to Brent here.

> Sometimes, I have to say something to someone who "gets it" first. 'Cause so many people don't get it. I've experienced a lot of violence on my body in my lifetime. I can't always talk about this stuff to outside people without knowing what I want to say first. I fumble over my words and my story if I don't have a safe place to tell it first. So running it by people who get it gives me strength. I can just get it out in the open, where I'm not judged. Telling other people about the crazy experiences from my youth gets me ready to talk through stuff when people just don't understand where I'm coming from. For instance, I remember back when I was telling a friend of mine about when my parents set me up with the counselor. How degrading that experience was for me – I mean, back then, I had to talk about masturbation practices with a complete stranger. I didn't realize it at the time but telling my college friend who also a gay helped me when I encountered a conversation with my own dad. I remember, we were riding in the car. I was an adult at this time, and I was talking about some of that crazy stuff with my dad. Basically asking him why he and my mom thought that was a good idea at the time. There was a pause. He said he didn't remember any of that. As if it had just never happened. I completely called him

> out about it. Telling him about the experiences – the having to talk about masturbation with a complete stranger – the way it's made me feel about my own body over time. He eventually finally admitted to it and apologized to me. That was a hard moment because the person who played a role in that stuff for me is actively denying that it happened. I knew I had to be really frank about how I felt and what I experienced in order to make him see where I was coming from. We couldn't just "not talk about it" in this very Midwestern "sweep it under the rug" kind of way. I knew then that telling the story before to someone who understood [my gay college friend] had given me the strength to stand up to my dad in that moment. Otherwise, I'd have been too tired. Too hurt.

Brent hits home with me. My own family has sometimes actively "forgotten" things from the past. I can think back to recent moments where they've said things like "wait, what are you talking about? I don't remember the ex-gay stuff." I realize it's painful to recount events like those. If I were a parent, I'd feel the same way, but "forgetting" is unacceptable. The act of "reminding" is an activism here—a way of saying "no, there'll be no forgetting here." It's often uncomfortable. It's often unpleasant. I don't make these rhetorical moves because I want people to feel guilt, but what I do as a teacher and researcher is wrapped up in these experiences. These experiences aren't something I'm willing to forget or willing to let others forget. Forgetting isn't possible. I'd not have the strength for this act of reminding, perhaps, without my communities—without, like Brent said, "running it by people who get it." Gloria Anzaldua calls this practice "spewing forth" (51) by which we don't always know what to say or how to say until we, well, say it. This telling offers a cleansing—getting our bodies healthy

to be activists—to keep speaking back and out. Our stories to "people who get it" become a rough draft—a self-reflective pedagogical space, where we learn what it is we want to say and how to say.

Next, Alex says the following:

> I remember I had one encounter with a person – I really had a connection. I've never been one to go out and have losoe sexual contact. I don't like that. Probably because of my history of sexual violence, there needs to be a level of trust there. I was connected to this one person, and I did have a sexual experience with him. And I have to tell you that in no time in my previous existence on the face of the earth, in no incarnation, as a child, in the context of the family group and Christianity and the context of the Christian group and the Christian community in the context of the ex-gay community which was within a group of the Christian community – it took me until post all of that to come to a point where I experience such a level of intimacy and communication – non-verbal communication with a person that I had never thought possible. It was finally – it was like I was finally at a point where I could communicate on all levels, something that I had worked so hard for all of my life to develop myself, to demolish all the internal walls that prevented me from accessing everything that I was, all of what I was able to do, how I was able to communicate. All I can say is that it was so right. It was so right.

I know when I hear his stories that we have to tell each other these things—things we've probably only told a handful of people in our lives. We tell each other for strength because

we're stronger we're likely more equipped to tell stories to outer audiences when the time comes, if we can get these painful stories out to each other.

Some of our moments together are tough; others are funny, light-hearted. Alex makes me laugh by using obscenities, which, given our relationship, are common between us, when we're being serious and when we're joking. Alex mentions how supposedly shameful sexualities impact the ex-gay movement:

> So [the word] Exgay, I never subscribed to it, and I don't like it because I think it hinges into negativity to begin with. I think the whole structure is leaning against a gay person out of just the way it was created, and to then label somebody ex-gay is like, it's the same damned thing. It's the same structure that was leaning against you, still leaning against you, and you're forever ex-gay and if you're in the damned group Travis, from that point on, every single person in the church looks at you and wonders if you're still screwing somebody of the same sex. Are you still fucking him up the ass? Don't tell me they don't think that, because they do. That's the label, and that's what it brings to their mind. Do you sit there when you meet a heterosexual for the first time, "Hi, my name is Robert. I am so glad to meet you." The first thing that comes through your mind, do you think, "Oh, Robert, did you fuck your girlfriend last night? Was it good? Did you fuck her up the cunt or did you fuck her up the ass?" Do you see what I'm saying? But if you introduce somebody to a gay person, the first person they think of is, "I wonder if they smoked pole last night." Why is it different? That's what I'm talking about, the structure.

I laugh when I read this transcript, and I laughed when Alex made this statement. But I've come to know Alex. We talk often online, send each other book and movie suggestions (we're both buffs), and have shared much with each other beyond the constraints of the project's interviews. Alex is one of the most polite and kind people I've ever encountered. Firm in his beliefs, he's still always polite, a listener, a truly good person. So, when he drops this language, I know it's for a rhetorical effect; it's so that he won't use this language later with other outside audiences. He releases the energy of his frustrations with ex-gay rhetoric in humorous ways in order to not only vent with an insider, but to protect his *ethos* in later rhetorical situations. I want to say, though, that I feel that the word *ethos* is lacking here because such a moment of protecting one's credibility is beyond a simple Aristotelian lens. I'd argue, as I have in this dissertation, that this face-saving is beyond the Greco-Roman tradition grounded in a rhetorician's privilege and power. For these rhetorical moments and rhetors are not coming from a position of power or privilege; each has much to "save" beyond "saving-face," for so much is at stake for these gay men in terms of speaking back against these kinds of oppressive institutions. Here, his politeness is something he uses to invoke change, because from what I've seen, even his fiercest opponents recognize his kindness and his patience. He listens, he hears. I know that he curses here, using the words "cunt" and "ass" with me, so that he's able to keep these words from audiences for whom his *ethos* would be at stake, again I use *ethos* for the sake of clarity, but as I've mentioned in earlier chapters, this sense of self in the rhetorical moment is much more complicated. Outside audiences might identify these words as oppressive or misogynistic, and I believe in many contexts they are. That said, he's drawing attention to how seemingly shameful sex and

sexuality are to this movement, by talking about what everyone's actually thinking. As a human race, we're sexual beings. Sex and sexuality pervade our everyday thoughts, so to pretend that these hypothetical audiences members (those who see ex-gay "reparations") aren't wondering about sex and sexuality. Further, he pins sex and sexuality to cultural "knowledge" about gay identity, commenting on how gay identity is perceived to be about sex.

While Alex mentions to me particular sexual stories, so does Brent, but not before he talks to me about being a "non-identity" and a "non-sexed person." He's establishing a relationship with me; he tells me this series of stories because he knows I'll understand. Queer people are often without lives, without sexualities, throughout their lives. In some familial circles, I'm still the only person at the Thanksgiving table without a story. I have many to tell, but I, like many queer people, have to find entry points in order to share in less-than-safe environments. So, when Brent shares these early stories with me, I know that he's trying to get me to think back to my own stories like these.

Brent says:

> So since my identity, my non-identity as either a non-sexed person, right, as a teenager who hadn't had sex with anyone yet, or sort of like straight until proven gay, right – as long as everybody kind of assumed I was straight, then I guess I kind of – in my mind, I kind of still was straight. Like I hadn't broken the seal yet, right, whatever, like I hadn't gone full on and had a gay sexual encounter or gone to a gay pride meeting, so therefore I was still okay. So in my mind, I wasn't gay yet, even though I knew that I was. So I remember that when I started to talk to my parents –

> well, when they found out, when I had basically had gay porn and they found that, and basically I began to tell them that I was bisexual. That was a way that I identified first, and even when I first came out, I didn't even know what that meant. I just knew that that was less harsh for other people to hear and all I cared about was telling people what hurt them the least. So that was kind of like a half admission, like oh, I'm bisexual, it could be worse, I could just be gay.

Brent is fairly open, so, different from Alex's stories, I imagine that the rhetorical circumstances of this story are different. I get the impression he's told this story before (I later find out that he has and does). He's similar to me and to Alex in that Brent's telling stories to an insider (me) in order to gain strength to face more oppressive audiences. But given the candidness of this story, I understand that this one isn't the kind of story that he saves only for insiders. While particular audiences may be more or less comfortable, his discussion of porn and masturbation contribute to how he understands his life trajectory. He isn't afraid to talk about sex, similar to many of the queer theorists we've seen in this project. Sex is part of the story. In reflecting on his experiences with ex-gay therapy, Brent says:

> Yeah, like my counselor for all those years was a very nice man, a middle-aged man, and he was a licensed therapist. I always felt like he felt half-hearted at moments, like him just being like "well, you should really think about women when you masturbate and then like trying to help me think through places where I could find images of women," like "oh, well, you could find them in catalogs or you could look for attractive women during your day and then go home at night and try to think about them and masturbate to them."

Brent and I share experiences with having Christian counselors, specifically counselors who felt might have had more complex thoughts about our "disdainful" sexualities. Brent tells this sexual story to outside audiences he later tells me because he hopes to shed light on the fact that his counselor was, indeed, skeptical. Brent hopes this story will make outsiders question the very institution. From talking to Brent, I realize that he's pedagogically-focused in his story-telling. That is, he seeks to teach his audiences, not with harsh words or hate, but with stories that might, perhaps, make them uncomfortable but that ultimately cause them to reevaluate and revise the stories they tell others in their networks. He goes on:

> Some of those practices, though, scarred me sexually for years after that because – for me, he was asking me to identify sexual practices or sex with heteronormative, like heavily, heavily straight world ideas of what's proper and good and right and worth – like there was just nothing sexy about that to me. The idea that I would fantasize about like a pretty, beautiful, sweet-smelling, clean, freshly-scrubbed woman, was not sexy. Like the idea to me of what was sexy was like the construction worker across the street or like something really forbidden, right. And I think that these ideas just reinforced that for me even more, such that, as an adult, I actually had difficulty in some of my relationships with other men actually seeing sex as like a connected emotional thing. Like I always saw sex as a very, very, dirty – but that was what was really hot about it, like it was this really forbidden thing, and I think all those early moments just reinforced that. And his ideas of either not masturbating at all or thinking about women when I did masturbate just made the moment of orgasm like that much more satisfying because I would think about a woman for five minutes and

then I would just kind of give myself over to these real fantasies, right.

No offense ladies, but tell me to masturbate to women and I go soft most of the time. I have better luck masturbating on a dose of Lexapro. That's no disrespect to women; I'm talking about my inner workings, as I know you have your own favored sex acts and sexualities. When Brent speaks to me here, I know he's speaking to me as an insider, but given his openness with talking about sexuality, I know that he's not afraid to share these stories with outside audiences. I've heard him do so many times. I find Brent to be the paragon of sexual- and sexuality-based fearlessness that Michael Warner and other queer theorists talk about. Brent is *the* best example of a queer theorist who disrupts this cultural fear of sex that I've met, read, or interacted with. He says:

> Like at the moment that I gave myself over to these real fantasies, it was just like incredibly hot, like in the way that you just know that you're gonna run to the freezer and eat that pint of ice cream and you're gonna regret it later, but like every bite you have is gonna be so amazing because you're not supposed to be having it, you know. In college, I just broke down finally and called a number on a bathroom wall and went to some guy's apartment and got a blow job from some ugly middle-aged guy who limped around the room, who was like a maintenance worker at the university. And here it was, like the most dirty, filthy sexual experience I could have ever dreamed of and it felt absolutely incredible. And here's the sad part – but it's only sad because like we're told it's sad, but like here's this binary in action again, right, that I would finally break down and have a sexual experience as an adult with another adult, and it would just be so awful and so far from what I thought I wanted, but yet that I

> would still find it completely hot or enjoyable, and I think that I went back to see that guy like four or five more times. Never did he do anything to me. Never did I kiss him or touch him in any way. He would always put porn on the TV and then he would give me a blowjob, and that was the extent of it. To me, it's like that's all I could handle at that moment. I couldn't even have thought about doing anything else with him or anyone.

Brent spills his thoughts. He's unapologetic. As a listener, I'm glad he is. Brent knows my stories. He knows who I am as a person, as a theorist, as a pro-sex feminist. He knows what he tells me not only connects with my stories, but also doesn't phase me. Though, what I know about Brent pushes me to think that he believes folks need to hear things that make them uncomfortable. So, when his audience isn't me, the story might be slightly different, but he doesn't cut corners. For that, I'm thankful.

How are, then, sexual, uncomfortable, and disorienting stories rhetorical and related to responsibility? How is shame rhetorical?

Lately, I find myself saying uncomfortable things and telling disorienting stories, as my participants have done in this previous section of this project. While these rhetorical moments and these audiences help me to find agency, I find that I hold stories and words in at some points, while spilling them at other moments. Here, I identify these narrative offerings, of mine and of my participants, as rhetorical events that invoke audiences and seek revisionary practices from audiences and look to analyze, how, and why particular kinds of stories are told. Kenneth Plummer investigates sexual story-telling practices in western culture, offering insight into the *how* and the *why* of these narrative practices. In his text

Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds, Plummer's arguments focus not on textual analyses of stories, but on "the sociology of stories" (17). For him, the cultural act of narrating, offering, confessing, and telling are grounded in symbolic-interactionism and "social actions embedded in social worlds" (17). In this text, he points to what stories *do* for tellers, audiences, and cultures by investigating rape-survival, coming-out, and confessional stories with focus not on the textual, but the bodily. That is, what the telling and listening bodies *do* with, for, within, and throughout the narratives. Plummer's ultimate goal, then, is to locate the ontological, sociological foundations of the acts of story-telling, namely sexual narratives. I point to Plummer here because he offers us the beginnings of a rhetorical approach to telling sexual stories. I use sexual stories in this chapter because I know first-hand (as do my participants) that, perhaps, nothing instills more fear than shame of our bodies and what we do with them. To connect back to Plummer, the "what-sexual-stories do" piece is to reclaim shame and to incite within an audiences a revised narrative (as I spoke about in the previous chapter about networks). Most of us grow up and begin to let go of many of these things as adults, though certainly not always. This chapter, then, was about how participants use stories to talk through "shameful" moments with audiences in order to elicit thought and change with those audiences or to speak with inner circles before seeking activist forums. First, though, I unpack what I mean by shame and how it relates to rhetorically situated stories.

I define shame as an emotion marked on our bodies related to interpretations of knowledge. Mostly I'd argue that we both *do* the marking and *are* marked, sometimes simultaneously. I'm not sure we can separate when those things happen. That is, I'd argue

we have choice in how we let things (said things, implied things, explicit things) impact us. For instance, people in my family can unknowingly shame me like no other. Over time, I've taken control of how I feel when things are said and done, whether implicit or explicit. That said, I can still think back to particular moments, where I wasn't yet able to do so. Here, this was knowledge about what I was supposed to "understand." For instance, I was supposed to "know" to always pee standing up when I was a kid. That's what men and boys do, right? When I was kid, though, I often sat down to pee. I was probably just lazy. When caught in this act, my grandparents often shamed me. "Boys *always* stand up to pee. Are you a little girl?" they'd say. As an educated adult, I look back on these words with horror. Clearly, the argument at hand is one of misogyny and patriarchy, under which the motivating factor is to shame a young male child by comparing him to a girl, the girl being the entity of utmost disdain. That said, the way I've reclaimed shame over time is to educate myself and to articulate my point of view for certain audiences at particular moments. No, I don't often speak about the right for young boys to pee sitting down, but I do see this moment as one reflective of larger cultural metaphors that have impact on how we understand the world. Thus, as an adult, I've experienced, read, and heard stories, then told alternative stories. I'm outspoken when I hear about children being chastised for their non-normative practices. In my early twenties, I'd have gone along with the feeling that some folks (myself included) are just "weird" for how they act; now I tell different stories, embracing the queernesses, the differences. Now I tell different stories and seek to educate others through these stories, for I understand the impact of shame upon bodies and their emotional states.

Sally Munt offers an analysis of emotions, bodies, and shame. For Munt, "[e]motions are not neutral, they are charged with consequences" (13). First grounding her research in her own experiences with being lesbian, working-class, and British in Yorkshire, England, Munt examines the intersections of shame as part of a "national imaginary" through which "diplomacy, of course, is the expensive international pastime of 'saving face'"(3). She purports "shame is an emotion that travels quickly, it has an infective contagious property that means it can travel, circulate, and be exchanged with intensity. Shame is peculiarly intrapsychic: it exceeds the bodily vessel of its containment – groups that are shamed contain individuals who internalize the stigma of shame into the tapestry of their lives, each reproduce discrete, shamed subjectivities, all with their own specific pathologies" (3). I use Sarah Ahmed here to contextualize shame. For Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others*, "[…] the body gets directed in some ways more than others. We might be used to thinking of simply which way we turn, or which way we are facing, at this or that moment in time. Direction then would be a rather casual matter. But what if direction, as the way we face as well as move, is organized rather than casual?" (15). Lines are created for us, she claims. We don't necessarily see them, understand them, articulate them—we can't even necessarily put our finger on why we are the way we are. Additionally, for her,

> […] what is 'present' or near to us is not casual: we do not acquire our orientations just because we find things here or there. Rather certain objects are available to us because of lines that we have already taken: our 'life courses' follow a certain sequence, which is also a matter of following a direction or of 'being directed' in a certain way (birth, childhood, adolescence, marriage, reproduction, death) […] (21).

That is, these lines are no accident. She goes on: "[…] 'what' we think 'from' is an orientation device [… as] the question of orientation becomes, then, a question not only about how we 'find our way' but how we come to 'feel at home'" (4-7). From my own perspective, I see that this cultural "device" of "feeling at home" rests on the foundations of myriad institutional communities, namely scientific and religious communities. What I would add to Ahmed's conversation is the notion of shame in relation to "feeling at home," especially when said communities seek to police marginalized bodies. When I visited an ex-gay conference I mentioned in this project's opening, I sensed and ultimately heard all about the shame in the room. Thus, "feeling at home" had less to do with my real feelings and more to do with what a community expected me to think and say. Thus, this "homespace" Ahmed mentions is a space of collective consciousness that exceeds the individual queer body, which is a concept, I believe, she could grapple with more thoroughly. Because certainly the lines are drawn for us—the home and its comfort is made—but I find it necessary to draw a connection between just how inseparable the feeling of "being home" in time, space, and body is to a dominant ideology. It's nearly impossible to trace what is ours and what is the institution's. It is shame, then, that corrals and polices the body within the institution—makes the body feel less "at home."

The lines that Ahmed mention arouse cultural panic and shame through what Michael Warner would refer to as "zoning"—zoning not only of the queer body (and all bodies) but of spaces that bodies inhabit. To zone, then, for Warner, is to prevent sexual variance, the very thing that keeps sexuality a space of policing. Warner asks and subsequently answers: "what do we do with our shame? And the usual response is: pin it on

someone else" (3). I find this question and answer interesting because an institution, like, say, an ex-gay ministry arises out of a system of the bullying and the subsequent "pinning" that Warner mentions. While I believe that many leaders involved with ex-gay reparative processes genuinely believe they are helping people, a capitalist foundation informs this movement. An economic exchange happens when a person transitions from gay to straight. Family values, Americanism, and other nationalist tenets prevail and ultimately overthrow any cultural or sexual variance. These nationalist ideologies reify "common sense," as Warner says "[w]hen a given sexual norm has such deep layers of sediment, or blankets enough territory to seem universal, the effort of wriggling out from under it can be enormous" (6). The body is zoned and ultimately corralled by shame; any deviation from cultural lines of common sense rhetorics threatens the body's capital. In his fourth chapter of *The Trouble with Normal*, Warner sheds light on shame by examining zoning practices of NYC's sexual communities, namely Times Square. "Along Christopher Street, you can immediately tell something is wrong" (149), he says, as he analyzes the "cleaning up" of Time Square's former hot spots for sexual paraphernalia and public sex. The lines are quite literally shifting, as Ahmed might say. In Rudy Guiliani's late-1990s push to clean up the area for families, bodies are policed and institutionalized through his zoning amendment. One of Warner's central claims in this text is that culture pressures citizens of all kinds to repudiate sex and sexual practices, especially queer practices, so as to continue the power elite's stronghold on the constitution of moral sex (read: heterosexual, vanilla). Here, in Warner's text, I see that what Ahmed doesn't offer is an analysis of how lines that were once new

paths, like Time Square, a gay Mecca, that historically offered sanctuary for non-normative bodies, can, indeed, be redrawn to serve oppressive, dominant paradigms unfortunately.

Shame, for Munt, though, is grounded in disattachments and "can also incite willful disintegration of collectivity, it can cause fragmentation, splitting and dissolution in all levels of the social body, the community, and the psyche itself" (26). She then asks "[c]an there be a homosexual subject who is *not* formed from shame" as she goes on: "the growing consciousness of same-sex desire must, in a Western context, give rise to feelings of difference and exclusion" (95). Along the same thread, she argues that "an identity may be imposed, or it may even be wished for, but there is ultimately no choice, if one wants to live out erotic attachment to one's gender, in experiencing some form of ascribed exclusion/prohibition" (95). We are a culture of shame; thus, I don't always see merit in perceiving shame as a black abyss in need of eradication from our lives. Conversely, I believe, as other queer theorists have said, that shame is a necessity—a valuable tool—for accessing one's own identity.

For Eve Sedgwick, shame alters meaning, identity, knowledge, and is not "toxic" (63), but part of identity formation. Most queer critical theorists will tell you shame is bad. But I'd argue it's not always entirely bad. Or even something that we can put into good-bad binaries. Rather, I'd say that shame is often used as a form of disidentification and simply *is*. Here's where the rhetorical part of this argument finds fruition. Munoz describes "the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). Survival strategies, then, are about unlearning

and reclaiming shame through stories that might make their audiences uncomfortable but that are pedagogical in nature, like my early story that opened this chapter.

Extrapolating Rhetorical Theory from These Theorists About Sexual Stories

Alex and Brent are dear to me not only for their friendship, but for what they teach me about rhetorics. In the previous chapter, Brent, Michael, and Jack taught me about how rhetorics and responsibilities connect together to create rhetorical methods for interacting with audiences. Here, Alex and Brent have contributed to this thread. Alex is politely coy with his disruptive rhetorical moves. He saves face—establishes an *ethos* of politeness—with audiences he's less comfortable with. Given his experiences—some deeply traumatic—he creates with me an insider community. When we tell each other stories—the painful ones—we're letting go, venting, prepping ourselves to be strong rhetors and activists. Ultimately, we're disrupting a grand narrative not only about ex-exgays, but about survivors of violence. Together, Alex and I build a method and a rhetoric of activism that works for people like us. As I've said before, I don't always have the energy to tell my story. In fact, I often don't. Brent is different than us, though, and to this statement, I don't attach any sort of value-judgment on any one of us. Brent has had different experiences than both me and Alex. He's not, to my knowledge, experienced sexual violence. Thus, I believe his rhetoric and his method to be more "in-your-face" with audiences, whether he trusts them or not. In the case of both Alex and Brent, I deeply respect them as rhetors, theorists, and activists, for both what they do and don't say. In every case – through every story – they seek to not only mediate but to reclaim shame for rhetorical purposes.

Chapter 5:
GLQ Rhetorical Responsibilities:
Queering Grand Narratives

On a recent campus visit, a university dean asked me about my research. I was sitting at a round-table with him, my first traditional interview of the day. After a few moments of small talk about my experience thus far, he said: "What interesting research you're doing. The people in your research are gay, then straight, then gay again. Fascinating. Do you mind me asking, since you're also part of the group you study, you're primarily gay now? That's what your application letter implied." I answered, unphased. "Yeah, I'm gay." In the moment, I didn't think much about it. Later, though, I wondered: *How is a person* primarily *gay? Does "primarily" mean "mostly" gay? Does he ask this because he thinks I was straight for a brief window of time? What do I say? "Well, yes, except when I'm not"?* I identify as a gay man. I love men. I want to have sex with men. I want to build a life with a man. So, yes, I'm gay. But was I ever not gay? No.

I wasn't offended or shaken. Frankly, I get it; it's confusing. But so are human sexualities, desires, and the stories, discourses, and rhetorics that surround them. I don't tell this story to be the chief of the liberal police offended by anything and everything and ready to point my finger at an oppressor. I knew I'd get this question frankly. Trixie Smith and Malea Powell both warned me to be ready for it. This benign interaction points to a larger cultural moment, whereby non-queer or straight folks want to understand. They want to nail down this whole gay thing, once and for all, where seemingly identifiable names, like "gay" and "ex-gay" "make sense." Even the most liberal of academic-types often get it wrong, I think, but in moments of trying to "get it," folks mean well. But "getting it" often lies in a

tradition of "understanding" that gay identity exists, and that it's easily understood by categories. This chapter is about how participants tell different stories to enact queerness for activist rhetorical purposes—sometimes to disrupt stories themselves; other times, to dismantle labels reflective of oppressive stories. In each case, the primary mode of disruption occurs through stories about embodiment and lived experiences, and the entity being disrupted is the idea of a grand narrative—narratives often about what it means to live life as a gay, ex-gay, and ex-exgay, but also what it means to be a non-normative sexed being. *What* are *grand narratives associated with this movement and its counter-movements?*

First, I identify a "grand narrative" as an over-arching, common story told under the guise of "common sense." Such a story's telling results in oppressive outcomes (whether those are explicit, inexplicit, or a hybrid of the two) for the entities of these stories, for we know from rhetorical historiographies, like those of Walter Mignolo, Thomas King, and Malea Powell, that not everyone has the agency to tell stories or to speak back against stories that write bodies in oppressive ways. For postmodern theorists like Lyotard, grand narratives take breath from difference, opposition, and plurality, as he theorizes in *The Postmodern Condition*. Such modernist approaches inhibit possibilities. A western grand narrative about gay, white middle and upper-middle class men is that we struggle with our sexualities early on, come out (once, of course), move to urban gay meccas on the coasts, and party it up for few years, before settling down with another male, getting "gay married," and living a life resembling many straight people (if we look closely, we can see threads of the straight trajectories as well). Grand narratives evolve and depend greatly upon who's telling the story and for what purposes. For instance, we "learn" from 1980s and early 1990s text that being

gay means dying from AIDS; films like 1985's *An Early Frost* and 1990s's *Longtime Companion* become problematically pedagogical in this way. Further, we see grand narratives about gay history position the "beginning" of gay history at the 1969 Greenwich Stonewall Inn Riots, when other accounts point us to earlier activisms that undo this story, or at least make *a* history alongside many other stories.

In defining the inner workings of an ex-gay or ex-exgay grand narrative, however problematic, I struggle because an academic source won't do justice to stories I've heard, non-academic texts I've seen, and feelings that cycle back to things I've lived and embodied. I don't have a traditional "source" to point out for you about a sexual conversion grand narrative. The closest thing I can think of might be the *Newsweek* article I refer to early in this project. That said, I'm going to refer to two films, 2004's *Saved!* and 2007's *Save Me* to highlight grand narratives about this phenomenon.

The film *Saved!* offers a comedic take on religious dogma through a look into a private, Christian high school. The film's protagonist, Mary, a teenaged girl who, after finding out that her boyfriend (a prize-winning figure skater) is gay, breaks her vow of celibacy in order to rid him of his homosexuality. She gets pregnant, whereby the plot turns to her experiences of carrying a child out of wedlock at this high school. An ex-gay thread is merely one side-story in the film's trajectory, but this aside can help point us in the direction of a grand narrative central to sexual conversion. The film's gay, Dean, is, by default, a huge homo—a figure skater struggling with his homosexuality, but dating Mary to fulfill a heterosexual pressure from his community. When he's found out, his parents send him away to "Mercy House," a place where young gay youth go in order to be healed of their gayness.

Not surprisingly, we don't see Dean again very often in the film, except when Mary talks to him on the phone (he's often seen in cinematic asides, partaking in all-male activities and clearly falling in love with his roommate, Mitch, a fellow "struggler"—all the while saying things, like: "this Mercy House stuff really works; they've medically proven it."). Most of the story focuses on Mary's revision of her formerly conservative value systems in the face of her conservative, judgmental nemesis, Hilary Faye. The film's finale, however, takes us to prom at the Christian high school, whereby a number of the film's outcasts who've been banished from the event, including Mary and her entourage, as well as Dean and his new boyfriends (as well as the other boys from Mercy House) storm the prom and demand inclusion.

While this film is incredibly progressive and gay-friendly in its satirical approaches, we see a thread stemming from the character, Dean. Because his character is relatively flat (to occupy literary terms), audiences can only really see him as a series of events that he undergoes. Frankly, given that the manner in which ex-gay and ex-exgay people have been carnivalized in the media, this approach to Dean isn't surprising: he's a gay guy (gay at heart, not more complicated than that) who struggles with his sexuality and who feels internalized homophobia. Upon being caught and punished for looking at gay bear-daddy magazines, he's sent away, where he first trusts in the institution Mercy House, but later rebels and claims his gay identity. I'm not saying this is a poor representation of a gay character, or even of a pseudo-ex-ex-gay character (the film doesn't use that language). What I do point to here is that this flat but progressive character isn't benign. There's a story written on to this body about what it means to be gay and to undergo reparative therapy. Though, I can assure you;

it's much more complicated than this cinematic representation, as my participants and I can attest.

A more "round" character (again to use literary terms), Mark of 2007's *Save Me* is a meth-addicted train-wreck who we meet in a hotel in the film's opening, where we see him after an anonymous sexual encounter. After he's been on a two-day drug excursion, his brother finds him and says that he'll turn him into the police unless he agrees to go to an on-site gay conversion ministry. He agrees, and audiences are taken into an ex-gay-like world of an on-site sexual conversion home. Here, Mark is never not gay, per se, but feels a sense of homophobia that he's told relates to a series of unfortunate events, but falls in love with and learns to love another of his housemates. His "struggle," we're supposed to understand as audience members, is about "his journey to loving himself," as the film's trailer implies. The conversion practices and ideologies he faces are always-already a space of contention, as we're clearly supposed to despise these practices. Mark, though, briefly falls for their rhetorical practices, as he becomes a Bible-toting believer in sexual conversion for a moment, but then a few encounters with his white, beefy housemate points him in the direction of "true love," whereby he becomes a "good gay."

Mark goes through a similar process to *Saved!*'s Dean, whereby Mark finds himself in a pinch, feels guilt and internalized homophobia, undergoes reparative practices, but then ultimately he only finds "wholeness" from a white, beefy hunk who can take him away from all the internalized homophobia and pain. I'm not saying these cinematic representations are entirely bad. We need characters who disrupt normative (hetero)sexualities. What I'm saying is that, as my participants will point to, the paths are rarely as well-defined as they are in

these movies. A grand narrative about ex-gay or ex-exgay, indeed, exists, but our embodied rhetorical experiences are far more complex.

Queering with Brent, Alex, and Jack

I first look to Brent to introduce the complicated nature of stories surrounding sexualities as narratives or paths:

> At this point in my life, I definitely identify as a gay man. At the time in my life when I was trying to deny gay identity or keep the identity from developing, the conversations around terms like ex-gay didn't exist as coherently as they do now. I know that those things were around at that point, but we're talking 20 years ago, and I think that the ex-gay movement is much more developed now, as are the counter movements. At the time, I didn't know the term ex-gay because I was a teen, and I just knew that being gay was bad and that I hadn't come out yet or come out at all.

He identifies *now* as a gay male, but he remembers a time when identifiers like "gay" and "ex-gay" were less prevalent. Though, the time he speaks about happen in the early 1990s—the time of the gay 1990s—so while I trust his memory, it is still memory. Here, Brent helps me to disrupt my own ideas about the 1990s. I was a child in the 1990s. When I'm offered stories about "collective" grand narratives about U.S. sexual politics, I'm told, through books, movies, and even others' memories, that the 1990s were "very gay." This isn't Brent's experience. This comment in and of itself strikes me because it forces me to disrupt my own biases about gay history, thus making "history" plural. Add an "s." His account offers a meta-moment, where I, as an interviewer (and friend), challenge my own assumptions about queer grand narratives. This meta-moment about remembering a history sets the tone for

much of what he says later. It helps me conceptualize this entire chapter, where the topic is a queering (of sorts), a disrupting of a single path—disabling and challenging *one* story. In the moment, I see this story as being incredibly disruptive to my own understanding of gay history. From this disruption, I conceptualized this entire chapter about queering grand narratives.

I want to return to Brent's words from the previous chapter for a moment, where he says:

> I had this non-identity as either a non-sexed person, as a teenager who hadn't had sex with anyone yet, or sort of like straight until proven gay, right – as long as everybody kind of assumed I was straight, then I guess I kind of – in my mind, I kind of still was straight. Like I hadn't broken the seal yet, right, whatever, like I hadn' gone full on and had a gay sexual encounter or gone to a gay pride meeting, so therefore I was still okay. So in my mind, I wasn't gay yet, even though I knew that I was.

An ex-gay grand narrative often puts in place a identify signifier, whether that signifier is "gay," "ex-ex-gay" as the story goes. But Brent makes a deliberate rhetorical move here by identifying himself as a "non-identity." I understand this first-hand. My family, for instance, often have non-memories of me, whereby they say, "oh, yes, now we see it all clearly—of course, you were gay" (when I first told my mom, she said, "no, you're not; you play basketball"). They see me as gay *then*; gay in the past. But I side with Brent here. For years, both he and I were non-identities; I wasn't gay then. Was I—was he—emotionally and sexually attracted to men? Probably, yes. But being gay doesn't easily translate into a

coherent, single sex identity. We're born into this world to be heterosexuals. The smallest early inkling that we're different brings a great deal of dissolution, disdain, and disruption. Thus, a non-identity status is a likely approach to the world. Brent makes a disruptive argument, for the non-identity isn't one that's as culturally recognizable, as, say, the "I-was-always-always-'gay'" narrative.

Further, I understand that Brent has "[broken] the seal." But he must continue to break it over and over again with many different audiences. I look to Brent here to coin a rhetorical term that adds to queer theories, like those of Butler and Sedgwick. "Breaking the seal" offers us a way to think about how one approaches the early coming out process. "Coming out" is overdone and oversimplified. Butler and Sedgwick argue that we approach many closets often simultaneously. Closets are professional, personal, ideological, political. Breaking the seal, then, continues the unraveling of the idea of *one* closet, for it is, for Brent, a series of potential rhetorical events (like a pride event), or, perhaps, bodily experiences (like, say, gay sex) that gives way to this coming-out performance. I realize that I'll take this term to my own stories for audiences like the dean I mentioned earlier (though, perhaps, I won't bring it with me on a job interview).

By the time I'm writing this chapter, Brent and I are friends. I know his coming out story backward and forward because it's come up often over the years. We're both grad students, so we're familiar with texts like Sedgwick that articulate complicated sets of closets queer people face. That is, these arguments about being in and out as more complicated than a single "coming out" utterance are on both our radars. The arguments he makes (and the ones that I agree with) offer a "duh" moment to many academics relatively familiar with

queer theory. In the worlds we both inhabit, plenty of folks, like the dean on my campus visit, understand these conversations as less obvious. For non-queer people and non-academics, a process of juggling multiple closets doesn't register as a reality. For instance, Brent is talking about inhabiting multiple spaces simultaneously. He's gay on the inside (as far as he knows), but he's read as straight sometimes (but other times, not, he tells me later). That said, he's "not quite yet" because he's yet to make a series of coming-outs (read: a public declaration or attendance at a pride parade). Here, sexuality is a battlefield for cultural ideologies playing out for myriad audiences. That is, we often can't separate our stories from the stories written on and about us. When he remembers his sexuality and speaks about it retrospectively, his sexuality encompasses a rhetorical sphere of internal and external audiences (related to rhetorical situations) coming together. For instance, his words "in my mind, I wasn't gay yet, even though I knew I was" offer disjunction with a rhetorical purpose. Brent is speaking about fluidity; his story unravels his audience's expectations (to use Jack's rhetorical methods from the third chapter). I'm his audience in this case, but I know that he, like Alex did in the last chapter, speaks to me first to face later, more-aggressive audiences who need to hear stories that dismantle a single narrative trajectory about ex-gay transitions but also about sexuality in general. Brent later tells me that he tells these stories because people want to simplify his sexuality; they want to simplify their sexuality—their desire. Ours.

Later on, Brent tells me:

So I remember that when I started to talk to my parents – well, when they found out, when I had basically had gay porn and they found that, and basically I began to tell

them that I was bisexual. That was a way that I identified first, and even when I first came out, I didn't even know what that meant. I just knew that that was less harsh for other people to hear and all I cared about was telling people what hurt them the least. So that was kind of like a half admission, like oh, I'm bisexual, it could be worse, I could just be gay. So for me, that was like – that was the path of identity for me. It was kind of child/preteen/early teens that was kind of non-sexed, right, because unlike a lot people, I didn't try to show a lot of interest in girls or – I didn't ask a lot of girls on dates, but at the same time, I really kept in check the amount of gazes or looks or things that I would give towards men, right. I was very careful not to get caught or openly be seen as gay in any way. So I think I kind of felt like asexual for a lot of my childhood and early teen years, and then at the point that I had to start identifying as something – like my last year of high school, it's really interesting.

"[Breaking] the seal" to his audiences, Brent's narration of his trajectory does, in some ways, mirror the cultural narrative because of its relationship to a claim to "bisexuality." I don't have source that I can point to here, but I can draw upon years of stories I've heard time and time again—and I can draw from my own experience. Gay men do, indeed, often "break the seal" in order to ease into a non-normative sexual identity (read: being gay). That said, he has offered a queer trajectory, but this moment points, perhaps, to a more traditional narrative about his sexuality. Though, Brent, as he's said himself, hasn't been one to attach himself to labels that clearly mark transitions between "gay" and "ex-gay" and so on.

My last year of high school, I did finally go to prom, and I asked a girl from my church to go to prom with me, and she went to a different high school than mine,

> and that kind of like let me off the hook a little because all those people in my high school that were already wondering if I was gay, then there was this really pretty girl that they didn't know anything about from another high school, and so it kind of like saved me the scrutiny of, oh, well, he's just going to prom with this girl that nobody would ask out anyway. You know what I mean? So I think that was like the only moment that I kind of tried a little bit at heterosexuality.

I know by this point from Brent's side stories that he's already "broken the seal," but his attempt to "try" heterosexuality points us in a direction different than many stories. For instance, Brent's Christian background doesn't dictate his path. For most the "trying" of heterosexuality, as many ex-exgays will tell you, marks a clear moment of internalized homophobia predicated upon a religious belief system. While Brent is raised in a conservative religious household, his story doesn't push the idea that his religious beliefs cause his "trying out" of heterosexuality. This rhetorical move strikes me, for I realize that very few stories that any of these men have told me, minus Jack's, have pointed to their religious affiliations. I pause to wonder if there's something going on here because it seems that rhetorics of the ex-gay movement and its stories always translate to religious identities. Many of these men are spiritual, but as an observer (and from my own experiences), I don't see these religious moments as always-already parts of these stories, like I'd anticipated. In fact, what strikes me further is that I realize this dissertation could have taken on a tone as a project about religious rhetorics. It hasn't, though. From this moment on, I start to understand that a rhetorical move that's happening is that ex-exgays are taking the religion out of these conversations. Are there religious overtones? Sure, of course. But what I come

to understand is that these rhetorical practices are about taking the religion out of the conversation. This act, then, is a form of further activism. Religion is a highly personal, intimate construct that doesn't help audiences to see beyond their own beliefs. But these men position these stories in relation to broken infrastructures, rather than personal battles with their own religious identities. Through this lens, these men can, then, approach their audience networks from a standpoint of logic.

> It was like the very end of my high school time. I thought I would make this attempt to be seen like – and I remember like she was really nice and we made a great couple, and I think she – we kinda liked each other a little. I think that had I been straight, like there could have been something there, and – but it didn't go anywhere, and that was just yet another one of those moments in life that reinforced for me, okay, I'm not straight. So then that trajectory was kinda like childhood, asexual teen, really sad attempt at being straight, straight until like sort of this bisexual identification but then sort of became gay eventually, right.

Here, Brent identifies a queer path. It does follow a narrative form, but it doesn't reflect those we see in the cultural narratives seen earlier in this chapter. From stories like these, he challenges his audiences to move beyond a simple narrative. By telling these stories, Brent sends audiences back to the drawing board to ask "what is my path been, and how has it been different than what culture tells me it is?" Activism lies here. For when his audiences, whether liberal-progressive (like the dean in my campus visit) or antagonistic (like his Christmas-card-sending uncle), do some reflection here that ultimately challenges the way we think about our life paths—paths that rarely reflect the grand narratives that cultures create

for us. Here, activism is happening, for if his audiences can unravel their own different paths, then they can see that others go through similar processes. When they go through such a process—when they're shown a story that's outside of a grand narrative—they're less likely to point fingers to the "weird gays over there." When they're less likely to point fingers, they're also less likely to tell harmful stories to their own networks or vote against things like marriage equality. It's quite a cosmic process. Brent knows this.

> When I went away to college, I had already kind of decided in my mind that there was no changing my feelings and my urges and my temptations because I still very much thought of them as temptations at that point. I had just decided after those two years of counseling therapy that I was not going to ever not be saddled with these feelings, these urges, right, and that the best that I could do was to be this kind of asexual person, a person who is single the rest of their life, a person who never married. So I kind of just like accepted that I was gonna be alone the rest of my life, which was like a really sad thing, I think, and that I thought that the way around that was maybe to go into the ministry, like become a pastor or, at the every least, just be extremely involved in church, and I started really, I think, falling into some extremes. Like I went away to a really large liberal state university, but I immediately joined a really conservative campus ministry. So here I was – in a way, wanted away from my family and away from my church, and I went to this place that was really liberal and open, but then I like immediately avoided the reason that I had gone there. So like I was always in between these two extremes, like flirting with different extremes and never quite knowing. So this is why it's difficult for me to

> think about the ways that people will sometimes try to label gay or not gay, ex-gay, ex-ex-gay, sexual, asexual. Like these are hard spaces for me to contemplate because for me, like they were always these layers that were partially like – I don't know.

Brent's "I don't know" here is a place of knowing *and* not-knowing. I understand. These audiences he mentions—these "people who will try to label"—he's mentioned them before. They're his audience networks. There's more.

> Like there's a lot of intricacy and – it's like a dance, like this really highly choreographed dance or a chess match or whatever to figure out, like where things end up, and I don't even think I knew where it was going to end up, but it had to play out in ways that gave respect or credibility to both of the things that were at work in me, and so I think I did start to turn away from that sort of Christian non-gay identity, maybe like what we might now call ex-gay, right, but I had never come out before that. I mean, this was all happening at a time in my teenage years where I hadn't had a chance to be out.

Often, calling one's self "ex-gay" is part of accepting one's body as a site of healing. Brent disrupts this positionality, in many ways deeming the language of this institution untenable. He's not identified often in his life. What does a movement such as this one do when people don't identify at all or don't have words for their experiences—not words but only complex, intricate stories.

> Like I think nowadays, there are probably – and even maybe shortly after I did, there probably were people who were out at 14 or 15 or 16 and then could then go back in and then come out again, and for me, that was a different trajectory. But I did in my

> early 20s then start to slowly turn away from denying that part of me and began to slowly start embracing the idea that I was gay, but even then, I was at this large liberal state university with an extremely active LGBT group that met every week, and in four years at that university, I never went to one of those meetings, never, and I was petrified of going to those meetings. I thought that I would become this drinking gay person, this drug-using gay person, this promiscuous gay person, this really vulgar, cussing, just like practically a gay Satanist, right. I mean, like I really thought that this is what it would mean for me to finally then embrace gay identity, and I think that the religious right and the conservative religious groups have done a very successful job selling to their people the idea that if you choose to be openly gay, whatever that means, that you will then become all these things.

Here, Brent speaks directly back to the ex-gay movement and its rhetorical power. He points to the fact that his awareness of a particular narrative, one where he'd fall to a series of temptations. These are stories. What kind of stories, the audience has to decide. Brent tells different stories, and he's aware of such a rhetorical move—aware of his activism.

> But that had to happen really gradually. I couldn't just say like – and honestly, like something like making a new gay friend or having gay sex for the first or second or fifth time wasn't going to be this moment like this. And I think that's what people think is, you know, then you get your first boyfriend or then you have gay sex for the first time, and it's just rainbows and this epiphany and like choirs of angels are singing and you realize like, I'm not ex-gay, I'm gay. And that doesn't happen. Like there has to be a bunch of like really, really hard moments. Like you have gay sex for the first

> time and you love it, but you hate yourself or you get a boyfriend and you practically can't function because you're both 22 and you're both F'd up from an entire life of trying to deny being gay and you don't even know what it means to be emotionally available to yourself, let alone to a boyfriend, and every time you have sex, you wonder if you should have done it and you feel dirty, and so your first associations of love and romance are with like dirtiness. So I just don't think people get it, like I think it tries to get like put into these neat categories, and it's just a big huge mess.

As Brent has said before, he continues telling these stories to audiences because these "neat categories" don't help; they're not helping a gay cause and ultimately, they don't do anything for us, as minorities, in a culture where, for instance, in 2012, women's bodies are still under attack under the right's guise of "morality." Women are in position of having to account for things like their reproductive health—ultimately being accountable to men. These moments point to problematic, misogynistic stories about women and men. In this realm, women are subservient and second-classed to men. Thus, when Brent tells these stories, I see that he's aware of how these complexities reach to other groups of folks, not just gay folks. If his story can shed light on how labels and normative trajectories create rhetorical prisons for those labeled and for those non-normative, he can point to rhetorical contexts that impact folks harmed by said labels and trajectories. His disruption of "neat categories" translates broadly. Complementary to Brent's queer narratives, Alex and I theorize together. I say:

> In Exodus culture, I was constantly confused. X guy is gay and ex-gay simultaneously, but what does that mean? Doesn't that also kind of mean he's gay until he's not ex-

gay anymore, and then is he straight? Just juggling the labels alone is enough to undo the movement. The language is absurd and doesn't hold weight. It's not rhetorically effective, as we'd say in my field. It's just this interesting overlap between these words essentially, going back to what you were saying. I think what they don't realize is that their stories, their trajectories, and their labels are so incredibly fragile. One misstep in language, and their movement goes up in flames. It already has a few times, in fact. For instance, they had narratives about what gay men are, and how you change. They make the argument that gay men are often disconnected from feeling like boys. They equate this feeling with particular activities, like football. Well, I was gay, but was always athletic. I didn't have the same "problems." They didn't know how to help me at times, I don't think. Their literature doesn't account for that. It follows a trajectory. Gay men are X, Y, and Z. But thankfully, there's a problem with that kind of story. Number one problem, it's not everyone's story. When say that something is everyone's story, you risk people look at your foundation and being skeptical. Thankfully, over time, even the most conservative of people are looking more and more closely at sexual conversion practices and saying, "these arguments don't hold up." When these stories and labels are so fragile, you risk your entire institution. Which in this case is good. That's why we all need to keep telling different stories and fucking with these labels like you and I have been doing today.

Alex responds to me:

Yeah, it is. It's more complicated. It's a timeline, that's all I look at it. It's just a line of progression, a line of growth where things because of experiences, because of

> activities, because of thought and growth in thought and growth in understanding growth in comprehension, things morph. Things change. So you know, I went from being an abused child to finding solace in Christianity, a community in Christianity, finding the ex-gay ministry, to trying to reconcile some of the desperate experiences in my life within the context of Christianity then finding out further if I investigated it that that wasn't possible to reconcile those things. In fact, maybe they didn't even need to be reconciled. But maybe it was okay, that that was part and parcel to who I was. Moving again, morphing beyond all of that into now what could be labeled as ex-ex-gay, but what for me Travis is nothing more than me becoming more and more into who and what I am, and my sexuality, being gay, being attracted to other men, that's just part of who I am. It's not all of who I am, but it's part of who I am. And I know that because I was a Christian and because I became a Christian as a teenager, I did not have sex with anybody. I just didn't. Because I knew I wasn't supposed to have sex before marriage with a woman, and it didn't really matter because women don't do it for me. That wasn't a problem. It's was like, "Oh, so you want me to be celibate with women? So not a problem." My mind doesn't even go that way.

Like Brent, Alex doesn't buy labels, as his "mind doesn't go that way"—a reference to a metaphor for a queer path. In part of the interview I've not included in this chapter, he tells me he, in fact, "hates fucking labels." Putting a label attached to a particular story doesn't work for him. While Brent does give homage to a few labels in his stories, Alex's only label, he says, has been "himself," all along. Every moment, every experience, points back to his trajectory of being himself. He implies he was never actually the other things, these ex-gay

things. He even rejects "ex-ex-gay," as I do and as do many of the men in this project. In previous chapter, Michael spoke about using "ex-ex-gay" when he's doing activisms for particular audiences. Alex doesn't buy it, though. Labels point to institutionally-sanctioned stories. Alex queers. He *is* the action.

A person of action and resistance, Jack brings us back to the complicated nature of coming out. When he conducts this interview, he's less out; he's out to me, to his friends, and to some of his family. Since this interview, he's continued his coming out, but using it as an activist space. He's moving away from law enforcement to a profession in the ministries, where he plans to position himself to help people with embracing their sexualities. At the time of the interview, he identified as gay, but now he's out to more people. From our weekly phone conversations, I know that he's less concerned with the problematic stories people in his unit told about him when he first brought his former partner to department events. The stories must not matter much, though, given that he was nominated to be the chief of police recently. He's stopped making excuses and apologies. He's stopped changing pronouns, he's told me. These acts, perhaps, have disrupted any stories that have been told about him. What I respect about him is he moved from being a person incredibly closeted, but in later life, he's become a gay activist. Jack is the true kind of activist. He doesn't hold signs, he doesn't protest. He's the activist who isn't afraid to use male pronouns to the cashier at the check-out line anymore. He's the kind who now tells stories about his life to his co-workers. In previous chapters, I mentioned Jack's stories about being a "law-abiding citizen." In his small town, he capitalizes on this image for activist purposes. When he tells stories differently from the norm, people listen.

Early on, Jack says:

> As far as describing myself now, I consider myself gay. Do I share that with everybody? No, I do not. But the people that are close to me like at work or in some different settings or wherever, I would just not say anything. In the past, probably like whereas that I was straight, and I told everybody I was straight, and, you know, try to live the life of being straight and sharing that with everybody. And then for a while then I probably still lived the straight life but had like the gay relationship. Like it still was perpetrated as being a straight relationship, like a friendship relationship.

As I've said before, this note from Jack points to a different person than I know now. That said, I see threads of activisms in later parts of his queer story when Jack says:

> Well, I actually think that there was a sermon. And I kind of remember what it was, and in the sermon, you know, the preacher was condemning homosexuality, condemning all of these different things as being wrong and basically making homosexual people out to be these horrible people that are like perverts and society and everything, the unraveling of society, and that they're child molesters and that everybody's got to watch their kids. And I'm thinking I'm not like that, so I can't believe that everybody who is gay is like that. It was like, you know, why am I continuing to listen to this. And then when I left, I would feel bad about myself and just keep thinking, you know, I'm not good enough to get loved by God or to get changed. So I think it was like, well, it's never going to happen. I mean, I've been doing this for nine years; it's not going to happen. I mean, I can still be a good person and be the way I am, and I guess that was the big thing. And, you know, after that,

there was some point in my life. The first gay relationship I ever had was a very, very abusive relationship, and it ended really bad. And I actually went back to the church after that ended and tried to get – tried, you know, like a last-ditch thing to think, well, maybe I was wrong and I can change and didn't. And I knew that wasn't the case. I sat in the back of the church after being there for how many years, that church that I went to my whole life, and basically that feeling wasn't there. And I knew then that, you know, it was just the relationship, and it was a hurt that I was going to have to deal with that it wasn't anything I had done wrong, that it was just a bad relationship. And if I just kept on, every time there's something going wrong, trying to ask God to change me, that wasn't going to be the thing. I mean, I was just going to have to deal with the issues as they come because even if it was straight, you know, it would be the same way. I mean, I would still have problems and stuff. So – and like I said, when I went back there and sat in the back of the church and people came up to me, it was like it's just not there anymore. I mean, that feeling that I had, you know, I felt okay with how I was. And I can't keep asking God to change me, and that was the last time I ever did.

I adore Jack's story. It's queer in the sense that he's not rejecting God, but an institution that uses God in particular ways. Earlier, I mentioned that these participatory theorists aren't talking much about their religion. This is story is an exception. But I do believe that this story speaks more to his experience with an institution, for as a grand narrative goes, he's queerly disconnected himself from a place of religion. He and I are spiritual people, both of whom believe in a greater power that we do, indeed, call God. That said, this is a moment

where he's speaking about an institution that makes a god for their purposes. He tells this story to point out that he eventually stopped asking for forgiveness. He never went back, he says. I've heard him tell this story in our church before. People clapped. People smiled. People were moved. They stood when he finished telling it. When a leader in the church, like Jack, says that people can't change their sexualities and that institutions that support these activities are problematic, his audiences listen. It's not in the interview data, but I've seen it with my own two eyes. Jack, like Brent and Alex, lives the verb "queer." This story isn't easily put into grand narrative form; he knows this, as do his audiences who listen. His story is queer in its nature of how he speaks about his relationship to the church. He makes a clean break; he doesn't stay with the institution longer than he feels humanly comfortable. Further, he doesn't struggle long with this institution. He's ultimately a person writes a new story, but claiming a queer Christian identity. From this story, he embodies survival.

Chapter 6:
So, What Can Ex-Ex-Gays Teach Us About Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Rhetorics?

Revisiting the First Pedagogical Snapshots

Pedagogical Snapshot 1: Stories teach us that all our bodies are complicated spaces, and we have a responsibility to talk about these complications …

At a CCCC panel about bodies, methodologies, and archival rhetorics, Casie Cobos, Madhu Narayan, Donnie Sackey, and Malea Powell offered their audience perspectives about their bodies within the oft-disembodied, institutional archive. During the Q&A, Andrea Riley Mukavetz asked each of the participants, "Could you talk about how your bodies are feeling in these difficult spaces?" This question was frankly jarring to me, for through relationships, I began to realize, I was able to articulate that my body is not often safe, sound, healthy, and strong. Relationships help with the telling of these stories, we often need to speak first to each other before we can speak to others. I take Andrea's question with me nearly everywhere I go. In the final stages of this dissertation-writing process, I think her question is one that we should continue to ask ourselves and each other especially as we enact local and global activisms, for ...

Pedagogical Snap Shot 2: … GLQ rhetorics are grounded in building relationships ...

In 2008, I'd introduced myself to Michael Bussee, and we exchanged stories online. At the time, I was working on a project that was about rhetorically analyzing ex-gay websites, so I was not yet invested in stories as a research method or interpretive lens. Since working together on this project, we've remained in contact on Facebook. He's always kind to me—delightfully so—and often asks about how the dissertation is going. He's one of the busiest,

most devoted activists I know. This week, he had dinner with Alan Chambers, a major public advocate of sexual conversion therapies. He's tirelessly devoted to our cause.

Alex and I became fast friends. We've become allies for each other. We check in with each other on Facebook at least once a week to say hello and offer encouragement. We send each other cards, Facebook wall posts, and many laughs. We both love movies, especially *Steel Magnolias*, and we often swap movie quotes in private messages or wall messages. He knows about the emotional weight of the job market and has acted as a support system for this entire year, as I've neared completion of this project and gone on campus visits and done phone interviews. We also have lived in similar places over the course of our lives. He's someone I've come to care about deeply.

I visit Jack a couple of times a year when I visit the metropolitan city that neighbors his small town. He attends a gay-affirmative church, and because of his church leadership and life devoted to just being a down-right good human, he's been encouraged to follow what he understands as his calling. He'd be an out, gay priest in a gay-friendly sect of his primary denomination. He and I chat on the phone about this a couple of times a month, and over the years, we've also become friends. He came to my graduation, in fact. Further, Brent and I see each other everyday. We've stayed friends for years now, and we've supported each other through hardships of academia (this year in particular). He's currently finishing his graduate work, like I am, and will be taking an academic job in the fall, also like me.

What I find interesting is that I sat with my "data" for many months before I was able to really do much of anything with it. At the time, I felt incredibly disabled by such

inactivity. As an academic, I'm expected to produce and work daily, but frankly, I couldn't do much with the data; I was overwhelmed by it—the stories, the emotions, the bodies. But as my relationships with participants continued to develop over the course of a year, I was able to read, hear, and listen for what their stories were actually saying. Getting to know these men helped with interpretation and analysis. From the stance of traditional research methods, this process sounds backwards. I should start with a clump of data that I'd then interpret, where I'd then learn about participants. But the process was quite the opposite. The relationships made the data for me. As I said before, I've never felt comfortable with the idea of "applying" a rhetorical lens to this project. That is, I sought to let the rhetorics and meaning-making processes arise out of the stories. I realize now that I could have never seen, heard, or listened for anything at all if not for the relationships I built with these men. I say this because I'd not have known them well enough to know what was arising without time and trust.

Pedagogical Snapshot 3: … we're responsible for telling the hard stories even if and/or when they're hard on our bodies.

As I said before, this project is about theorizing with stories—the good, the bad, and all the in-between. Though, if I seek to make this claim, I have to also acknowledge that my story up to this point has little prominence in this project. Below, while difficult to do, I'll offer you a piece of my story—the one that most impacts my role and investment in this project. People ask me often why this research matters to me, and I normally give them a Cliff's Notes, business card-length explanation. It is always awkward. It is always a moment where people even upon hearing the abridged version feel sorry for me or exercise their need

to pat me on the shoulder. My story is one of many, constellated among many others and puts me in an odd relationship with this research project, for I am both a stakeholder and a scholar here. Everything about this research process is both awkward and liberating, for I feel the personal weight of the project, but also the professional, "researcher" pressure of the discipline. In tracing a GLQ rhetoric linked to ex-exgays, I fear that I will regret telling this story because it *is* emotional, but as I've said before: this project is not about revisiting victim narratives, but about tracing rhetorics of survival. The short version goes something like this: I came out when I was sixteen, I went back in the closet because I was religious and because I briefly joined a Houston-based ex-gay ministry, and I came back out at twenty-one. That said, I rarely tell the long version.

In the fall of 1999, I came out officially and told a few people about my sexuality. In the small suburb of Houston where I grew up, this would have been a big deal, but I was invisible in high school. I had played basketball, but I wasn't an uber-jock, was painfully shy, and hardly said two words to anyone ever. My teachers only knew me because I was "well-behaved," a signifier branded on me from Kindergarten on. I was very Molly Ringwald in *Sixteen Candles*—minus the vagina, the Jake Ryan, the Thompson Twins serenade, and the "happy birthday, Samantha." When I came out, a few folks paused, perhaps, to hear this news from the rumor mill, but no one paid much attention, nor made a scene. I didn't get beaten up or harassed, as I was a tall, broad, and relatively muscular seventeen-year-old who, while very queer and "weird" according to high school politics, had passed.

By early junior year, I'd moved lunch tables, from invisibility with the b-jocks into relative visibility with the "freaks" (read: the people who would go on for graduate degrees).

I came out to "the weird girl" who identified as bisexual. A few years before, she and I had dated, and she was one of the few school people who I thought really knew me—a good person to hear my "news." The truth is, I'd known what I was since I was a kid, but this act of telling was something I needed to say aloud—a test, perhaps, to see if I could. While I could pass, I was actually a fairly queer kid who was pretty self-aware and knew himself. When I came out to her—in the parking lot of a slummy McDonald's, my shaking fingers greasy from French fries—the saying of it was pretty painless. She already knew, as I imagine most folks did.

She introduced me to the "weirdest" guy at school—a gay guy who had come out in, like, sixth grade or something, as the lore went. He was everything I imagined a typical gay guy to be, with his blonde, spiky hair, tattoos, piercings, tight pants—a handsome clone of 1999 boy bands. Both terrified and intrigued, I met him at a coffee house and gay bookstore in Montrose, Houston's gay neighborhood, a space that soon became my roaming grounds. Fast friends we became. I transitioned from wallflower, but into what I'm not exactly sure. I had friends, I had weekly weekend plans, I capitalized on a "gay jock" image (but was far from a jock, of course), and I worked out every day and as often as I could (this was what made me "a jock" in gay communities, though I was far from it). Sure, I went a little wild for a bit: I lied to my parents often, failed a semester of chemistry and Algebra II, failed a few English papers about *The Inferno*, and got into a relationship with a guy who was sixteen years older than me and with whom I fell madly in love. When I met him, he was the most handsome man I'd ever seen; soon, the sun set and rose by him in my world.

He was a turning point. Meeting him would change my life in more ways than I could have known or imagined. He was from the Midwest and had moved south during his military career. Deeply religious, he was out and lived as a gay man, but, from my understanding, he dealt with internalized homophobia. On three to four occasions over the years (before I knew him), he involved himself in Houston's sexual conversion therapies and ministries. While I was aware of his history with these affiliations, I didn't know or think much about them or his specific experiences; they rarely came up in conversation. That changed.

On October 31, 2000, Halloween night, I was out and about getting into trouble in the gayborhood. Dressed as a "bum," I made my way around to a few holiday parties. That night, a few guys—older, "hot" and "so mature" in my eyes—invited me to a private party. Once I made it there, I immediately felt like something was wrong, but I stayed. If I'd listened to that feeling and left, my life would be infinitely different, perhaps, or maybe not, but it feels like it. But I didn't leave. I was a physically strong seventeen-year-old, but I wasn't strong enough, I guess. I had deep bruises. I had to drive myself to a doctor soon after to see what damage had been done. I never told anyone. My skin was red for a few nights, where I sat in scalding water and took baths as often as I could. I can and could never quite forget. Forgetting took a few different forms early on, though.

I went about my life as per usual as best I could. I went to school—by that time, I was a senior—and I found ways to reach out to God or some entity that I hoped would tell me something eventually. Somewhere in there, I wrote a poem that talked about my experiences from that night. The poetry made it to some regional poetry and prose thing in

my area, but no one really got what it was about. Around that same time, my application to give blood at my school blood drive was rejected for undisclosed reasons. I got what it was about. Though, they didn't, I felt like everyone knew, but by that point, all they knew was that I was gay and that I was "weird." I had a few panic attacks at school—well, quite a few—and startled really easily. I had flashbacks often.

When things really started to change, Thanksgiving was near, I remember fairly clearly. While I was sitting with him on his bed, he said, "we're living in sin." I believed him and knew why he said such a thing. I didn't have much else to believe in. My pursuit of a straight life through ex-gay ministries began soon after. A few weeks later, we met his old advisor at a breakfast place in Houston, where I could eat and couldn't do much else but listen. The advisor guy was one of the kindest people I'd ever met. Having talked to him relatively recently (as in the past five years), I still believe this statement. He's a good man—one who believes drastically differently than me—but a good person, nonetheless.

So, what did this process look like? Well, for one, it was never a seamless transition from gay to straight or any other bodily category. When I decided, as I did, to meet a major figure from an ex-gay branch in Houston, I wasn't immediately straight, nor was anything but gay, but I wasn't even ex-gay, either. You can imagine the confusion. Burke talks about the fact that an audience plays a big part in the ways that they're persuaded; they have to want to be persuaded, he says. I wanted to be, for, in retrospect, I see that no amount of unwanted persuasion could make me want to be with women. In those moments of my past, it wasn't so much that I wanted to be straight, but I wanted to be with the guy I loved. If I needed to pretend to want to be straight to do so, I would.

I graduated high school on May 26, 2001. I wanted to worship God, but in retrospect, I see that I actually worshipped my ex-boyfriend. By this point, he no longer talked to me and was dating someone else. He was the reason I was doing all of this stuff, and he was gone now. I felt like I should have known, but by this point, I was just trying to deal with feeling the pain of violence, I think. I stayed "ex-gay," but I never called myself this name. I was kind of "straight" now, or at least I was trying to be, but I was also kind of "gay." I really only used the term "ex-gay" to talk to other folks like me. I met often with other men like me and spent great amounts of time praying. I went to meetings and socials that encouraged me to leave my homosexual behaviors in the past. I could do this just by being celibate; I didn't necessarily have to be or claim to be straight. I could meet a woman, or I might not, they said, but what mattered was my journey to healing.

My parents realizing something was terribly wrong felt I should go to college and encouraged me to apply late to a small state college in east Texas. Highly resistant, I finally did enroll in classes, declared a major, and made plans to leave Houston for a more traditional college route in August 2001. Soon before I left, I met a woman with whom I am close still (we talk about once a week). We became fast friends and eventually decided to be together, later getting engaged. My life then made me forget my past. I didn't have anything to do with ex-gay organizations any longer, for I was content with disconnecting with all events from those times in my life.

She and I fell in love. I did and still do love her, though my love for her will always be platonic. That said, because I had love for her, I convinced myself I could be straight. By this point, it wasn't so much that I wanted to be straight, but that I was used to not identifying as

gay. People were kinder to me, my parents seemed more content, and ultimately I felt safer living in Texas and being "straight." Violent experiences dictated this desire and need to feel safer. While she and I broke up in October 2002, we stayed close friends. Meanwhile, I spent the next year of life single with no real love interests or pursuits. I knew I was gay, but I didn't care to admit it. Soon after my twenty-first birthday in 2003, I met and soon fell in love with my dorm suitemate. While spending the better part of a year not admitting that we were in love, we spent all of our time together. It was then that I realized I couldn't and didn't want to continue on with the "lessons" I'd learned from my past experiences. In 2004, I re-came out (Webster, 2008). Since then, I have identified as a gay male and have sought to make meaning of my experience by telling my story. I've done this by speaking selectively about these experiences in my field and in relatively safe online spaces with other people who've experienced similar things. It's hard to tell this story, for when I tell it, I risk my own body. I risk seeing raised eyebrows, feeling immense shame, and even being judged by those within and outside communities where I feel safe. I continue these snapshots here and as separate "lessons" because, as I mentioned in the first chapters, if I'd introduced them earlier, they'd have made less sense to you as audience members. Much of this dissertation is experiential. You had to see, feel, hear, and embody it with me, as we told a series of unifying and disparate stories. Hence, these pedagogies come as final snapshots that make meaning alongside the first three.

Extending the Pedagogical Snapshots

Pedagogical Snapshot 4: Discomfort is okay, for it often leads to something.

This dissertation should actually be titled "This dissertation is going to make you uncomfortable potentially, but everyone in it has a rhetorical purpose for doing so, and you will learn from the purposes." I think back to a story Trixie Smith told me toward the end of this process. She mentioned that her former partner bought the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry*, which chronicles the life of Brandon Teena, a transperson who was assaulted and murdered in early 1990s. The film is incredibly raw with its scenes of rape and murder. Trixie said that she'd not actually want to own this film. While the film made her uncomfortable and she'd only seen it once, that's all she needed. Hearing the story once was powerful in its own regard. The discomfort with the story, its images, and its messages resonated with her. The single meaning-making moment for Trixie was knowing the story, interacting with it, and adding it to her own repertoire of activisms through stories. So, audience, in reading my dissertation, I'm not asking you to read the stories in this project multiple times. You might only seek to hear each of these stories only once, but do listen at least once, and do decide what you hope to do with these stories for your own rhetorical purposes, but keep in mind that …

Pedagogical Snapshot 5: When we tell our stories, our bodies are on display.

This one sounds obvious. But never has it been more apparent than today as I have to make a decision about what to include in the final deposit of this dissertation. Questions running through my head: "Will and for whom will this dissertation be google-able?" From that question, I also have to ask what stories of mine that I'd want "out there." My participants minus Michael are mostly protected by pseudonyms, but my name is forever connected to this project—a project where so much of me is on display. I have to admit that

in the story I told above is slightly abridged with slight modifications. The original written version that I defended before my committee was more raw. I realize that I have a responsibility to tell my story, but I do also have to make rhetorical decisions about *how* vulnerable I want to be when connected to this project. I don't have a pseudonym. I want my body in all my projects in my field, but the extent to which I want my body in my work is a decision I have to weigh carefully. For instance, in my field, I'll always be connected to this project, so I have to make decisions about audiences. Are broader, Google-able audiences, or even my entire discipline, the audiences who need to hear *all* the nuances of my stories? I'm constantly negotiating display of my body and for what audiences I want to enact this display—and to what extent. I might not tell my story *every* time, and I might be selective about my stories, but …

Pedagogical Snapshot 6: Each articulation of activism is different for each rhetorician, but no activist moment is any less rhetorical than any other.

You'll notice that Michael in some ways appears silent in this project. He's not at all: he's our group's biggest advocate. I don't know a more involved activist, and I, perhaps, never will. When I first began this project, I noticed that Michael's stories were often different from the rest. For instance, Michael wasn't telling sexual stories as often. His activism is embedded in a public persona, where telling particular kinds of stories could potentially set our activisms back. Earlier in the project, I mentioned that many of the men in this project consider themselves small-scale activists, whereby their daily interactions with people (e.g. in the grocery store check-out line) are the sites that offer them activist venues. I interpret Michael's activisms as related to a public persona of moving forward conversations

about ex-exgay activisms, and this persona often changes the kind of stories that activists can and do tell. Other forms of activisms arise in this project, too, as we've seen. For instance, telling sexual stories affords rhetoricians particular rhetorical moments for particular audiences and contexts; in Michael's case, I understand that he's constantly weighing his public identity, differently from the other rhetoricians who're often weighing their rhetorical decisions within everyday, more private rhetorical situations. Each moment for each rhetorician is, without a doubt, a moment of activism, but the audiences and ultimately spaces are often different …

Pedagogical Snapshot 7: Stories make space for conversation and awareness.

The final two snapshots are married by the fact that they're cohesive but also symbiotic. Stories make space for rhetoricians, audiences, and those in between. Stories make spaces for people, for other stories, and for moments of healing, outreach, and activism. We've been talking throughout most of this dissertation about telling difficult stories that evoke activisms. But stories help to operationalize these activisms. Space is made. The theorists in this project are making space for conversations that are often left unspoken and unarticulated, for …

Pedagogical Snapshot 8: Stories help us all mediate and reclaim shame.

Nearly everyone in this project has in someway articulated a discomfort or at very least an awareness of culturally-visible and institutionally-imposed shame. This project is embedded in men telling stories about rape, in stories of violence, and in stories that are often difficult to tell and to hear. But in telling stories that evoke discomfort (for rhetoricians and for audiences), we seek to manage our own bodies in relation to these kinds of

oppressive cultural phenomenon. In western culture, we spend a great deal of time managing our shame. Such story-telling practices are difficult, yet cathartic. Even in telling my own stories here, I've had moments of discomfort with telling and even hearing my own stories, yet I've felt a great sense of relief in offering them to audience networks. I learned this first from my participants, though, for they have been the ultimate teachers of me and for those audiences with whom they come in contact.

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